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JUNE 2019 • ₹150 • VOL. 7 ISSUE 12 • NATGEOTRAVELLER.IN

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER

INDIA

THE
FOOD
ISSUE



Old Faves & New Hits

PONDICHERRY
SERVED UP
FRESH

LOS ANGELES
BIG CITY
BINGE

EUROPE
TASTY FOOD
TOURS

NEW ZEALAND
MELTING POT
MENU

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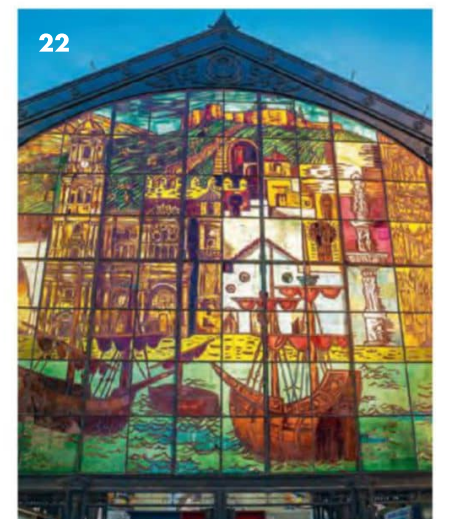
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RNI NO. MAHENG/2012/51060

Printed and published by Mr. Anuraag Agarwal on behalf of Amar Chitra Katha Pvt. Ltd.

Printed at Manipal Technologies Limited, Plot no 2/a, Shivalli Village, Industrial Area, Manipal-576104 and Published at Amar Chitra Katha Private Ltd., 7th Floor, AFL House, Lok Bharti Complex, Marol Maroshi Road, Andheri (E), Mumbai - 400 059, India, Published under license from National Geographic Partners, LLC.
Interim Editor-in-Chief: Lakshmi Sankaran
Processed at Commercial Art Engravers Pvt. Ltd., 386, Vir Savarkar Marg, Prabhadevi, Mumbai-400 025.

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EDITORIAL LAKSHMI SANKARAN

HEART IN A BOMBAY BUN

New and exciting has always received top billing in food—the latest fad, the newest restaurant, the trendiest neighbourhood, the healthiest diet. Often, these developments are accompanied by breathless pundit-like pronouncements: *Lebanese is the new Chinese; Chinese is new Italian (wait, where does leave that Italian then?)* A cuisine or dish has a moment, peaks and then becomes passé.

While there is no shortage of cover versions, originals stand the test of time. And at *National Geographic Traveller India*, we confess to being partial to one classic. Creating and editing magazines in this day and age, with limited or, sometimes, binding resources, is a mental endurance test. Nothing makes the looming pressures more palatable than food. It is always on our mind. What gets us through the final sweaty hours, month after month, is an absolute Bombay fixture—the *vada pav*. We are a group of ardent foodies, and the deadline-hour vada pav toast is our modest tradition. Vada pavs are to Mumbai what hot dogs are to New York. Naysayers can knock the street staple all they want but we, at the magazine, are quite misty-eyed about our Bombaiya tastes.

And for our collective money, there is no

vada pav that quite matches Ashok Vada Pav, or the Kirti College vada pav, as it is casually referred to. The choice might feel obvious to insiders but it is well deserved. Vada pavs are simple—stick a fried potato ball with a sweet scintillating chutney in a fluffy bun; what can go wrong? But Ashok Vada Pav punches up with the zingiest combination of sauces and just the right cook on the vada, and tops it off with the showstopper—crispy fried crumbs of batter. Think of it as vada pav with fries.

My thoughts on the vada pav can get more mawkish and graphic but suffice it to say that the pleasures of food are timeless. All the features in this month's edition, from Pondicherry, Los Angeles, all over Europe, Laos and New Zealand, recall this essential aspect of travel. Regular readers can pick up any edition of our magazine and confirm our dedication to food. Our writers go to wondrous locations and more often than not, they return with stories of food, of how a single bite opened a fascinating world to them. Once a year, we devote our energy into creating a singular edition where 'good food' is not the sideshow of journeys. For that special issue, taste doesn't seem incidental to storytelling, the spotlight follows it everywhere it goes. ✂



SANTOSH VARGHESE/SHUTTERSTOCK

OUR MISSION

National Geographic Traveller India is about immersive travel and authentic storytelling, inspiring readers to create their own journeys and return with amazing stories. Our distinctive yellow rectangle is a window into a world of unparalleled discovery.

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THE ITINERARY

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BHUTAN'S YOUNG SURF A NEW TURF

At the country's first skate park, kids in red robes glide about enthusiastically



JULIAN MANNING

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THE ITINERARY IN CONVERSATION WITH RAHUL AKERKAR

A TOP CHEF'S TRAVEL MENU

RAHUL AKERKAR, THE FOUNDER OF INDIGO RESTAURANT, TAKES ONE DIVING HOLIDAY A YEAR AND PREFERS STREET EATS TO FINE DINING FARE **BY BHAVYA DORE**



Akerkar (bottom) usually plans a food trip every year. In the past, he's been to Italy, Spain and Australia (top) among other places.

Rahul Akerkar, one of India's best-known chefs, opened the much-loved Indigo in Mumbai in 1999. Considered one of India's first stand-alone fine dining restaurants, Indigo shut last year, and Akerkar has since returned to the city with Qualia. Launched last month, Qualia has drawn flattering reviews for its modern, loosely Mediterranean-inspired cuisine. We spoke to Akerkar about how he travels.

How often do you travel and is it mostly for work or holidaying?

Not enough. I do one trip a year overseas. I don't travel ever for work per se. I always combine the two because, eating out in restaurants is like doing R&D. I do one trip a year where I go diving. The other trip I do is another kind of holiday. I will be travelling in July to go diving in the Galapagos.

What sparked your interest in diving?

I've been diving since 1985. I was in Mombasa for two months farting around. I went to propose to a girl there, and it never happened. So rather than getting upset and leaving I decided to have two months of fun. I was about 26. So I learned to dive there and I've been diving ever since. I'm an instructor too. If I wasn't cooking and running restaurants, I'd be diving.

What is it about diving?

I just love the ocean. I love that its pran in a way, the breathing, the fact that you are entirely in control of your own wellbeing. I like the fact that no matter you are with 20 people it's still a personal experience underwater.

And what about the other holiday?

The other holiday is more going to a place. I'm not a big sightseeing person. I love doing things. I try as best as I can never to stay in hotels, I always stay with people if I can manage. I meet people and we exchange addresses and they say 'Oh when you come next time, come and stay' and I say 'Be careful what you wish for, I will show up.' And I do.

If there is something interesting from the sightseeing point of view I'll make the effort. But am I big museum goer? No. I focus on experiential things, a safari or trek or hot air ballooning.

Does your profession factor into your travel?

We try and do what I'd loosely call a food trip every



FLIPPHOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK (MARKET), PHOTO COURTESY: SHEENA SIPPY AND SIDDHARTH GOGEL (AKERKAR)

year. We pick a place and see what they're doing food-wise. If there are well known restaurants or chefs in the area we try and go there and see what they're doing. We were in Singapore last year. In the past we have been to Australia, U.S., Spain, Italy, France, Southeast Asia.

Places you'd travel to for the food?
I've never been to Japan. It's definitely on my bucket list.

Exciting destinations for street food?
Southeast Asia; Bangkok, Singapore.

And for fine dining?
My wife and I always decide we are going to do five or eight days of dining at the haute cuisine level. But at the end you're fed up and want to eat hot dogs on the street. I'm tired of haute cuisine. It's too stilted, it's not fun anymore. It's too expensive and unnecessarily so. Are they pushing boundaries food-wise? I don't think they are any more. I think there are better meals to be had at the street food level. It's just more fun to see what's happening at the grassroots level.

How much have you travelled through India?
I used to when I was in college in the U.S. every time I came to India. I was a keen amateur photographer. I used to take off for three weeks with my camera, backpack and I never had a real plan. I've done Rajasthan, Gujarat, a lot of South India.

Does what you experience while travelling go into your work? And is it conscious?
I've never really thought about it. I have some things on my menu here that stemmed from influences when I travelled to Kerala. So yes it happens. But how? They're more like epiphanies. You travel along and think, this is a great idea. For example we have a tuna loin which has a typical curry leaf kind of sesame spice rub. It's typical in Kerala. We have an avocado pachadi. So that dish is drawn from that trip. But [consciously travelling to come up with dishes] is too much pressure and it's better when a creation happens organically rather than forced.

Do you cook on the road?
I've done guest chef stints all over the world. If I'm at a friend's house and they say Rahul you have to cook a meal, then I do.

What do you think of airplane food? Has it evolved?
I don't think about it. How can anyone think about it! I think in business class perhaps it's improved. In economy it's still the same everywhere. Reheated food. Some airlines take more care than others; you won't get a rubber omelette but something you can eat. If I can, I try and do a special meal if they offer it. Special meals are generally cooked specially. I say I want a seafood diet, so you get something out of the ordinary. I'm eating prawns while people near me are eating butter chicken.

Have you ever packed food while travelling? Is there any point?
I don't. If you want your *theplas* go for it. I like to try the food where I'm going. On the banks of Lake Como eating dal and *dhokla* is a bit much. ✕

On Akerkar's to-do list is making a journey to Japan for its cuisine (4); Some dishes in his new restaurant Qualia (2) reflect his travel experiences in Kerala (3); Although he has made his name in fine-dining, Akerkar loves scrounging for good street eats and recommends Singapore and Bangkok (1) for their vibrant street food.



DAVID KUCERA/SHUTTERSTOCK (STALL), PHOTO COURTESY: RAHUL AKERKAR (FOOD), DMITRY RUKHLENKO/SHUTTERSTOCK (BOAT), STEVE ANDREW VIDLER/PRISMA/ODINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (HAWKER)

RESPECT THE ANIMALS

TIPS FOR WILDLIFE ENCOUNTERS THAT PROMOTE SANCTUARY, NOT SELFIES BY NATASHA DALY



At Elephant Valley Thailand, outside Chiang Rai, tourists observe the animals from a safe distance.

Right away Elephant Valley Thailand felt different. The property, nestled in the forest on the outskirts of Chiang Rai, a small city in northern Thailand, was the fifth elephant attraction I'd visited in a week. I'd seen shows where elephants kicked soccer balls and twirled hula hoops. I'd watched people ride on their backs and swing from their trunks. I'd peeked into the stalls to which elephants returned after working, where they're chained by their ankles to posts. But Elephant Valley was quiet. It was the first time all week that I'd seen elephants from a distance. One was bathing in a pond, alone. Another two were eating in the middle of a field. Wooden fences surrounded most of the fields—to keep us out, not them in, John Lee, a manager at Elephant Valley, told me. That's what struck me most: No one was allowed to touch the animals. These were elephants being elephants. Elephant Valley Thailand, home to

five elephants that previously worked in trekking camps and the logging industry, is unlike most other elephant attractions in Thailand. Many of the country's 3,800 captive elephants live in camps that offer up-close, interactive experiences that allow visitors to ride or bathe the animals or watch them perform in shows. The activities are a massive draw for travellers from around the world, part of a lucrative global industry that puts people together with exotic animals for once-in-a-lifetime encounters. It's what brought me to Thailand, a month-long stop on a reporting trip for *National Geographic* magazine that took photographer Kirsten Luce and me to four continents over a year and a half. Our goal was simple: to look at the animals that entertain us and the people who seek them out. Those people are you and they're me. I have a photo of myself at two years old, perched on an elephant's back

at a zoo in my hometown of Toronto, Canada. Eight years ago, on my honeymoon, I went swimming with captive manta rays in Mexico. But seven years later, while reporting the story, I found myself watching a group of tourists pass around a tiger cub after paying a couple of dollars to feed him a bottle of milk—and wondering if anyone else was questioning why he wasn't with his mom. It's complicated. People love animals and naturally want to get close to them—and genuinely want to learn more about them too. It's a desire that's increasingly fuelled by social media, where travellers share their experiences instantaneously. The reality that many tourists don't see is that to stay in business, elephant interactions—and photo ops with tigers and swimming with manta rays—rely on a steady stream of working wild animals, all of which have been caught or bred or trained into submission.

KIRSTEN LUCE



The best way to encounter tigers in the wild is by going for a jungle safari (left) in India's many national parks; Volunteers cordon off the space around resting turtles (right) at Hawaii's Laniakea Beach to ensure that human activity doesn't disturb them.

And it's all too easy to misread signs of suffering. Captive elephants sway their trunks back and forth—almost as if they're dancing. In reality, it's a sign of psychological distress. Sloths seem to love cuddling, but their hug is really just an attempt to cling to what feels to them like a tree trunk. Dolphins appear to be smiling but that's the natural set of their mouths.

Travellers are increasingly recognising that many animal tourist attractions may not be ethical. More and more backpackers are shunning elephant riding.

The industry knows it. Dozens of properties in Thailand now call themselves "sanctuaries." Many look a lot like Elephant Valley and boast five-star ratings on travel sites such as TripAdvisor. But Kirsten and I found that, unlike Elephant Valley, almost every one offers elephant bathing for visitors who wish to splash with an elephant in a river or mud pit. Often the bathing is repeated all day long. And only trained elephants will submit to baths.

Jack Highwood opened Elephant Valley in 2016. The 40-acre property is his second elephant sanctuary, following a much bigger one he established in Cambodia. He chose to go small with the Thai sanctuary, installing inexpensive wooden fencing and minimal infrastructure because he wanted to make the model as easy as possible for others to copy. It felt

peaceful, several visitors at Elephant Valley told me. As if the elephants didn't even know they were there.

While travelling the world, I spoke to tourists everywhere. In restaurants and hostels. At aquariums and monkey shows. I would often ask people if they prefer to have an up-close experience with an animal in captivity or observe it from afar in the wild. More often than not, they told me the latter. Yet captive encounters remain extremely popular. Maybe because an animal sighting is

Travellers are increasingly recognising that many animal tourist attractions may not be ethical

assured. Maybe because the animals seem happy, and it seems that your admission fee is going to contribute to someone's pay cheque. Maybe, perhaps most compelling of all, because it gives you a photograph—you, together with an exotic animal—that can go straight to your social media feed, where likes and comments are guaranteed.

Across the Pacific, on the North Shore of Oahu, in Hawaii, there's a beach called Laniakea. People more commonly call it Turtle Beach, because sea turtles regularly come ashore. They'll pick a spot and sleep in the sun, sometimes for hours at

a time. Volunteers are there every day to keep people away from the animals. When a turtle emerges from the sea, the volunteers block off space for it with rope, giving the turtle ample room to relax in peace.

One weekday in September, I sat with dozens of tourists behind the rope and watched them watching a turtle. For the most part, people were respectful. A few asked why they couldn't touch. It's illegal to touch sea turtles in Hawaii, the volunteers explained. And it's important to respect their space, they added. This is their beach too, after all.

It can be hard for most people to tell the difference between ethical and problematic wildlife experiences. There are many shades of grey. But you might follow a few simple guidelines:

—Seek experiences that offer observation of animals engaging in natural behaviours in natural environments.

—Do your research. A highly rated place may not necessarily be humane. Read those one- and two-star reviews. It's often in the pans that visitors chronicle animal welfare concerns.

—Beware of buzzwords like "gives back to conservation" and "rescue." If a facility makes these promises yet offers extensive interaction, that may be a red flag.

Individual actions don't happen in a vacuum. When travellers decide they want something different, the wildlife tourism market will change. ✂

GUENTERGUNW/E+/GETTY IMAGES (TIGER), NATALIYA HORA/SHUTTERSTOCK (TURTLE)

THE ITINERARY SPAIN



Antigua Casa de Guardia is the oldest tavern in Málaga. Here, you can have the sweet wine directly from the barrel.

THE MAGIC OF MÁLAGA IN 48 HOURS

ART APART, PICASSO'S HOME TOWN BOASTS LIVELY BEACHFRONTS, BAROQUE BUILDINGS AND GASTRONOMICAL DELIGHTS STEEPED IN THE PORT CITY'S ANDALUSIAN PAST **BY STEPHEN CONNOLLY**

Many travellers have experienced the Gothic splendour of Barcelona or wandered down Madrid's stately avenues; even more have eaten their way through plates of patatas bravas and crispy croquetas in tapas bars across the country. Beyond the headline acts and the top 10s though, overlooked cities such as Málaga offer an alternative Spain, an Andalusian Spain where history, nature and culture collide to produce experiences and foods unique to the region.

Thanks to its busy international airport, which handles traffic for the entire Costa del Sol, Spain's sixth largest city is accessible for easy weekends, or as a stopover on longer visits too. With the warmest winters of any large European city, it's also a good

year-round introduction to an elegant, southern European town covered in the dust of North Africa. If you've got a weekend to spend then don't miss these cultural, historical and gastronomic highlights.

SATURDAY

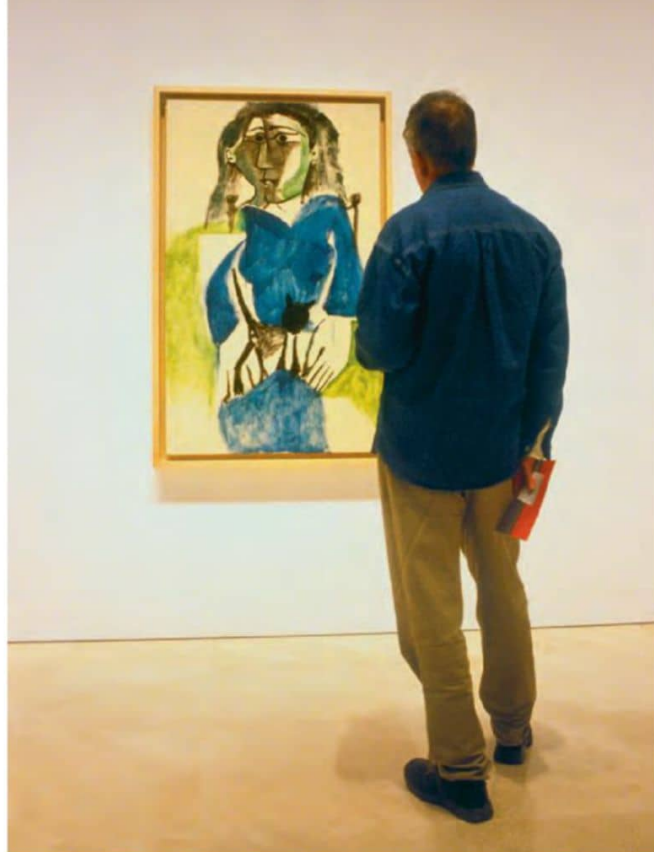
Down at the **Plaza de la Merced**, the atypical Malagueños who rise early to breakfast (the first meal often only takes place around 11 a.m.), sit surrounded by piles of Spanish novels in the buzzing **Café con Libros**. Waiters whisk by with icy tumblers of freshly squeezed orange juice and strong, quarrelsome-looking coffees. It's an appropriate cultural theme for a café where you can try the local staple of *pitufos*, miniature loaves of fresh, warm bread stuffed with tomatoes,

cheese or *jamón serrano* (cured ham), right in the shadow of Pablo Picasso's childhood home.

The nearby **Palacio de Buenavista**, the 16th-century building where Picasso was born, is now home to the **Museo Picasso**, boasting 285 works from Spain's most iconic artist. There's plenty of history underfoot too. Beneath the Andalusian tiles are the ruins of the Phoenician culture that established the city here as Malaka back in the eighth century B.C.; a fact which makes it one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. A visit to the archaeological exhibit in the basement gives a view onto the world that underpins everything the city was later built upon.

The Phoenicians (600 B.C.) were later followed by the Romans in the

INGOLF POMPE/LOOK/INODIA PHOTO LIBRARY



Málaga is the birthplace of artist Pablo Picasso, and the Picasso Museum (left) displays 285 works by him; The city is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities of the world, and structures like the 11th-century Moorish fortification of Alcazaba (right) tell the tale.

third century B.C., and then by Muslim Moorish rulers in the eighth century. This storied past is played out in the structure of the city itself, so when you take the brisk, five-minute walk from the Museo Picasso, through the ancient 220-seater **Teatro Romano** amphitheatre, and then up to the immaculately well-preserved **Alcazaba** (a Moorish military fortress), it's also a trip through history.

This legacy of exchange is also captured in Málaga's unique food culture, which rolls together the sea and the land in a coating of flavours borrowed from all of its inhabitants. Nowhere is this more apparent than at the monumental **Mercado de Atarazanas**, an imposing 19th-century hall filled with bustling crowds who stand shoulder to shoulder and order plates of Malagueño specialties. Ask for the most typically Malagueño dish and you may get pearly hunks of *conchas finas* (locally caught smooth clams) or *almejas* (small clams) soured in a Spanish-style garlic butter enriched with parsley and local sherry. Equally though, you might get the vibrant seafood paella, thick with loose-skinned tomatoes and musky with Arabian saffron. The market feels chaotic but it all runs perfectly

and people will advise you, not nicely perhaps, but authoritatively. Trust in their judgement and enjoy the best local produce and recipes.

SUNDAY

For the residents of Málaga, Sundays are for strolling, for visiting the miles of beaches which front the city, and for food. First of all though, for many of the predominantly Catholic Spanish, Sunday morning means a visit to the cathedral locals affectionately call **La Manquita** (the one-armed woman). It's a cavernous, baroque mixture of classical fluted columns, Gothic towers, and interiors of lavish opulence. Tours of the interior, including a rooftop walk, can be arranged through the cathedral itself.

Outside, the bell tower rings out over a neighbourhood where you can find gastronomic souvenirs like the famous Andalusian spice cake of almonds,

A typical Malagueño dish is pearly hunks of *conchas finas* (clams) soured in garlic butter with parsley and local sherry

fruit and wine, the *Tarta Malagueña*. Head for the port though, where the landscape is more open, dominated to the north by the hilly backdrop of the **Montes de Málaga**, a green-and-dun massif that twinkles with white haciendas and flashes of purple bougainvillea. The colours are matched by the man-made too, here in the brightly coloured form of the **Pompidou Centre**, a giant Plexiglas outpost of Paris's famous art gallery.

On Sundays the port's packed with market stalls filled with handmade jewellery, vintage clothing and local produce like the lightbulb-shaped jars of golden honey, locally harvested and studded with Andalusian almonds. The port is the beginning of **Playa de la Malagueta**, the grey-brown beach which runs east for seven kilometres towards the beach area of **El Chanquete**. On a Sunday, all of Málaga comes out to walk, jog, scoot and cycle this section of the Costa del Sol, a piece of Spain where the turquoise Mediterranean washes Africa onto the shores of Europe.

The most notable things in this part of the world are the miles of lively bars and restaurants (*chiringuitos*) that line the coast. On the beaches outside nearly all of these are small, refurbished

LUCAS VALLECILLOS/AGEFOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (MAN); KEN WELSH/AGEFOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (CITY)

THE ITINERARY SPAIN



Enjoy the freshest of produce and local specialties like clams (bottom) at the vibrant Mercado de Atarazanas.

boats that have been converted into barbecues for the grilling of locally caught fish. Don't miss out on places like **Andres Maricuchi**, where you can sit next to the beach and eat the traditional dish of *espeto*; sardines grilled on a skewer until the skin is bucked and charred with fine bubbles and lousy with rocks of sea salt.

Though if there's one food experience in the city that's worth having, then it involves going the full distance to

El Chanquete, so far from the centre that even the tireless beach runs out of steam. There you'll find **El Tintero**. If the long walk up the quiet beach is like drawing in breath, then this hectic, supermarket-sized seafood restaurant is a bellow of release. Don't expect anything as conventional as a menu; the waiters simply stroll around carrying platters of whatever is freshest from the kitchen. It's up to the bravest diners to decide what they like and to

catch their eye before another hungry soul waylays the parading server first. It's a vibrant, human version of dining, a fundamentally Spanish way of enjoying food when surrounded by friends and family. Yes, Spain has highlights galore, but if you visit here, to this out of the way place in an area many people never make it to, then you may just find out something about the Spanish way of living that people chasing top 10s are unlikely to. ✂

MÁLAGA'S MUST-EATS

Pablo Vasquez, a food guide and native Malagueño, whose company Spain Food Sherpas offers food tours and cooking classes throughout the region, lists some local delicacies.

Pescado frito Fried fish, especially *boquerones* or white anchovies.

Málaga wine This sweet wine from Málaga can't be missed. The best place to try it is at Antigua Casa de Guardia, the oldest tavern in town, where it's poured directly from the barrel.

Aloreñas olives The only table olive in Spain which is protected by the "Designation of Origin" programme that means only foods grown in that area can

be so named. Harvested by hand, you can find them everywhere in Málaga.

Gazpachuelo A popular soup of fish stock, mayonnaise and garlic that's particular to the city, and can be sampled at restaurants such as Restaurante Juanito in the El Palo neighbourhood.

Zurrapa A pork dish typical of the Ronda Mountains. Zurrapa is pork loin fried in lard, further enhanced by a choice of spices, garlic, oregano or paprika.

Plato de Los Montes This is a good example of

dishes that come from the villages in the mountains, and which differ from those on the coast. This recipe includes potatoes, pork loin, peppers, chorizo and blood sausage, all fried in lard.

Desserts They are still the same traditional pastries that were eaten here a thousand years ago: *pestiños* (a kind of doughnut enjoyed at religious holidays), the famous *arroz con leche* (rice pudding), and *alfajor* (an Arabian cake of spices, honey, nuts and fruit).





About 7,50,000 people walk under the luminous roof of the Grand Central Terminal every day. But only a handful really look up to find a small square in the northwest corner of The Zodiac Ceiling which shows its original colour before it was refurbished in 1998.

THE WHEELS OF TIME

A GUIDED TOUR OF NEW YORK CITY'S GRAND CENTRAL TERMINAL UNEARTH'S HEAPS OF HISTORY, A CHEQUERED PAST AND SOME HANDY TIPS **BY CHARUKESI RAMADURAI**

People discover their New York moment in various places; in the cheery music of a lone busker at Central Park, in the interminable wait to get inside the Met on a rainy day, even in the bite of a dense bagel laden with cream cheese. Me, I found it at the Grand Central Terminal. To be precise, at the statue of Roman god Mercury outside the building, flanked by Minerva and Hercules. Although this triumvirate sculpture is known as "Transportation," what it represents is the true spirit of New York. For, Mercury—messenger of the gods—is himself the god of commerce and communication, a fitting icon to this city that marches to the beat of financial glory. And on either

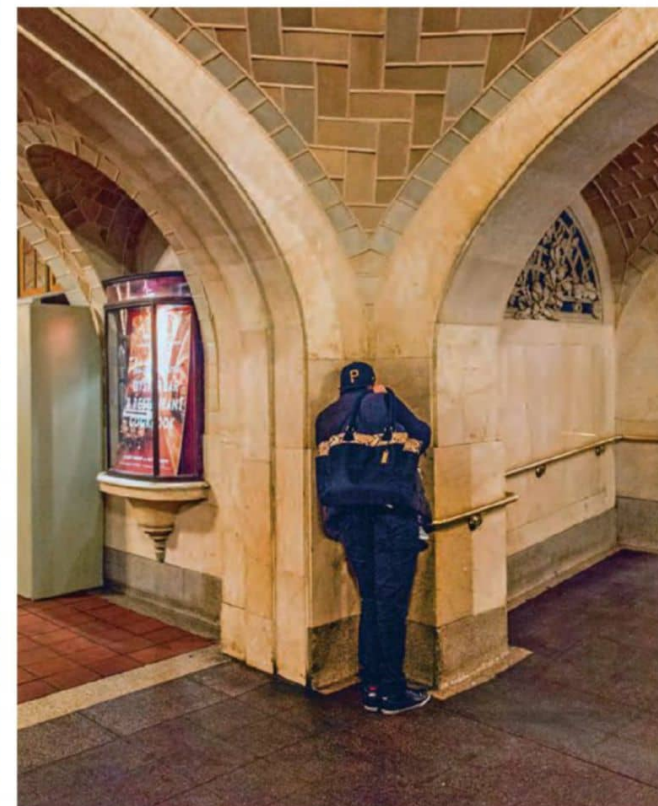
side, Hercules—known for his physical strength and love for adventure, and Minerva—goddess of wisdom and art.

SIZE MATTERS

Pass through the portal underneath and you enter one of the most iconic slices of NYC history, opened in 1913 and spread over 49 acres. Much like other important train stations all over the world, the Grand Central Terminal—just don't call it Grand Central Station, as that refers to the U.S. Post Office down the street—was a beehive of activity when I walked in late one spring morning for a guided tour. Commuters on their way to the platforms scurried on, immune to the magnificence of their

surroundings, whereas tourists such as myself simply stood and gaped in awe. The sweeping marble staircases, the lofty vaulted ceiling, the gleaming brass grills, all lit softly by sunshine streaming in through the tall windows, held my attention like a warm embrace. Early for my tour, I first headed to the Grand Central Market to graze and gaze upon the massive hall brimming with gourmet foods from all over the world. The market is a riot of colours and smells; think 400 types of cheese on display along with dozens of oven-fresh breads, juicy cuts of meat and bright fillets of fish. I was pleasantly surprised to see garam masala for sale, right next to Cajun potato mix and zaatar spice

SEAN PAVONE/SHUTTERSTOCK



The Whispering Gallery (right) at Grand Central Terminal is not an uncommon venue for wedding proposals; Magnolia Bakery's (top left) vanilla cupcakes are their bestsellers; Local vendors do brisk business at the Grand Central Market (bottom left).

mix, attesting to the city's status as the world's cultural melting pot.

EYE IN THE SKY

My two-hour walking tour started at the Main Concourse, with docent Bill Rosser directing our attention to the sprawling mural on the lobby's ceiling, a stunning canvas of 12 constellations painted in gold leaf, along with 2,500 stars, some of which twinkle with clever LED lighting. However, what I did not realise, until Rosser pointed it out, was that the Zodiac Ceiling, designed by artist Paul Helleu, was an inverse representation of the constellations. The logical explanation was that the painters placed the original design on the floor, drawing on the ceiling while looking down. However, businessman Cornelius Vanderbilt, Grand Central Terminal's prime benefactor, sheepishly claimed that the design was executed as intended, the constellations in reverse to depict the way god saw them from high up in the skies.

That blooper apart, the Grand Central Terminal is still considered one of the finest examples of the beaux arts style of architecture that originated in France and found favour in the U.S. between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Drawing from classical Greek and Roman themes along with French and Italian baroque elements, this style has been used here to great effect through bold sculptures, massive chandeliers and grand archways. The terminal is also home to two iconic clocks—the world's largest Tiffany clock ticking on since 1914, right under the statue of Mercury, and the four-faced opal clock set in brass, estimated to be worth a staggering \$20 million, on top of the main Information Booth.

UPS AND DOWNS

On the walk, I learnt the terminal was built over 10 years, beginning at the turn of the 20th century. The modern terminal for electric trains replaced the old and obsolete Grand Central that

was meant for steam locomotives. Train travel was at its zenith at that time, for both commuter and cargo traffic, and the structure was built keeping future growth in mind. That foresight paid off, since this building still sees over 7,50,000 visitors every day, a good mix of travellers, tourists, train-spotters and history buffs. Keep in mind this is also the world's largest train terminal with 700 trains passing through each day, served by 44 platforms and 63 tracks. Even in the full throes of the 21st century, looking to a future filled with hyper loops, autonomous vehicles and spaceships ferrying folks to life on Mars, one might believe train travel still reigns when standing in Grand Central.

Yet, it has not always been smooth sailing for this beloved transport hub. The terminal thrived initially, having 65 million people cross its halls every year. However, during the second half of the 20th century, American railways as a whole lost their sheen. Grand Central fell into neglect, and was even



Located on the terminal's lower level, The Oyster Bar boasts an extensive wine menu, of which 80 can be ordered by the glass. It also serves over 25 types of oysters; Shake Shack's (bottom) breakfast menu is only available at transit hub locations, such as the Grand Central Terminal.

threatened with demolition several times. Although the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission designated it as a protected building in 1967, it was only in the 1990s that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority finally carried out restoration work.

Seeing its busy foyers and bustling food courts today, it is difficult to imagine the scenario described by my guide—where vandals and vagrants shared space with commuters under the grimy ceilings and unwashed windows of this New York landmark.

MURMURS AND MEALS

I pondered on the sordid chapters of the building's history until I reached the Dining Concourse at the lower level adjacent to the Whispering Gallery, the stuff of romance and intrigue. As we stopped in front of it to hear more about these walls and the popular Oyster Bar & Restaurant behind it, I could see people of



all ages pressing their faces to the wall to whisper sweet (and not-so-sweet) nothings to a partner listening on the other side of the gallery. Experts say that the acoustics are due to the domed ceiling, which carries the whispers along its curvature to the opposite end. Of course, plenty of people were indifferent to the wonders of such whispers and focused on their lunch at one of the several cafés in the Dining Concourse, many of them local favourites such as Shake Shack and Magnolia Bakery.

On our final foray, the guide took us to the chic bar that remains hidden to all but the most astute of Grand Central's regulars. The Campbell bar is a throwback to the good old days of classic cocktails, such as Campbell's Martini with vodka and dry vermouth, and The Stackhouse Sour made of bourbon, egg whites and fresh lemon juice.

There are way more secrets and stories in the passages of the Grand Central Terminal than my mind could contain—an annex of tennis courts once leased by President Donald Trump, a top secret room used during World War II that does not even appear on the building blueprints, and a covert platform used for discreet travel by celebrities,

including former President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Given the significance of the Grand Central Terminal in the contemporary landscape of New York, we can only be thankful for those who fought to preserve it in the 1960s, among them Jacqueline Kennedy. She once said, "I think if we don't care about our past, we can't have very much hope for our future." ✂

ESSENTIALS

The Grand Central Terminal is located at 89 E. 42nd Street (www.grandcentralterminal.com). It offers daily tours led by experienced docents (nyc.docentour.com; 75 min; 9 a.m.-6 p.m.; adults \$30/₹2,110, children under 10 \$20/₹1,400). For an audio tour of the terminal, pick up a headset from the Tours office in the Terminal's Main Course (9 a.m.-6 p.m.; adults \$12/₹850, children \$10/₹700). The audio tour comes free with the New York Pass, and is also available as an app for iOS and Android devices for \$4.99/₹350.

THE ITINERARY BHUTAN



At the skate park, the older kids often coach their younger counterparts on how to stand upright on four wheels.

BHUTAN'S YOUNG SURF A NEW TURF

AT THE COUNTRY'S FIRST SKATE PARK, KIDS IN RED ROBES GLIDE ABOUT ENTHUSIASTICALLY, UNAWARE OF THE AMERICAN WHOSE UNTIMELY DEATH KICKED OFF THIS REVOLUTION **BY JULIAN MANNING**

A handful of children surrounded me, half of them clad in ruby red robes, the others tucked into winter sweaters and jackets. "Acho (big brother), please play with us!" they requested, brandishing skateboards and asking me to teach them how to ollie. Little did they know that it'd been over 10 years since I jumped on my banged-up deck, an Alien Workshop, now gathering dust in my parents' shed. My rusty moves might disappoint them more than my refusal. On the other hand, the kids seemed to be warming up to me this afternoon, as opposed to the baleful eyes that had greeted me the day before. I also didn't want them to think I was some poncey *chillip* (a colloquial Bhutanese term for foreigners), too cool to hang out with kids.

As it turns out, it was hard to say no to a gaggle of puppy dog eyes, and I gave in. My worst fears were confirmed as I jerked and flailed on the deck like an inflatable man advertising a car wash. I didn't even try to ollie off the ground, and instead abandoned the ambling board as if it was a speeding car headed for a steep cliff. The kids looked more confused than disappointed. Then I caught Sonam's eye, the only girl at the park, dressed in a Union Jack sweater, as she held her little brother's hands, teaching him how to balance on the board. She smiled at me, and let go of her brother's hands, allowing him to gracefully glide away.

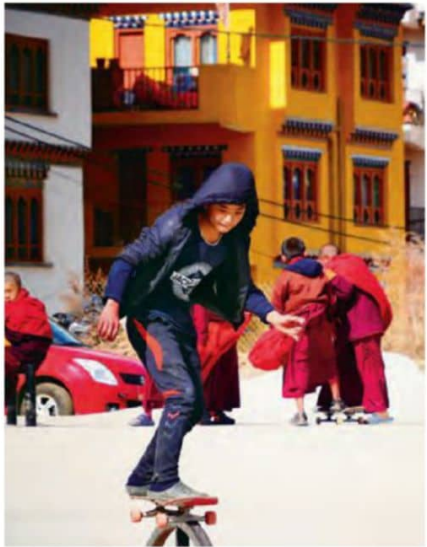
Even though they whizzed about the skate park with relative ease, these kids had been skating only for mere months.

Hardly any of them wore shoes, and instead maneuvered around on the frayed grip tape of their boards with worn chappals. This was the country's first skate park, a swathe of smooth concrete built on the edge of the capital Thimphu at Babena, Jungshina.

The children here shared one board between five of them. If one of them couldn't stand up on the board without teetering they'd push him around. When another landed a three-foot drop without batting an eyelid, the others watched keenly, ready to learn how the trick was done. They skated without pretense. They surfed cement for a simple reason—it made them happy.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

The story of Bhutan's first skate park



Johnny Strange (right) came to Bhutan to scale Gangkhar Puensum (middle), the country's highest peak, and stayed on for six months. About the success of the skate park in Bhutan (left) with local children, Strange Sr. said, "That makes me so happy. Johnny would be so happy."



begins in sun-soaked Malibu, California with Johnny Strange, an adventurous American. Strange belonged to a well-to-do family that participated in all manner of adventure activities such as trekking, kayaking and rappelling. His family always knew he had the spirit of an adventurer. Yet even they were surprised he asked to join his father on a summit of the highest peak in Alaska at just 12-years-old, and were amazed to see the youngster beat the formidable peak, hungry for more.

"He was a fierce kid, and when he put his mind to it, he could accomplish quite a lot," said Strange Sr., in a telephone conversation from the U.S.A. Strange was a big wave surfer, skateboarder, paraglider, base jumper, martial artist and mountaineer. But his daring feats weren't confined to the outdoors, at least during his late teens.

He once surfed atop a BMW on a busy California thoroughfare, which made national news in the U.S.A. According to Strange's family, he regretted some of his daredevil acts because he didn't want other kids to try them and get hurt. Strange's personal mantra, however, differed: "The day I let fear deter my ability to follow my dreams, I have already died," he said.

In 2009, 17-year-old Strange became the youngest person in the world to conquer the Seven Summits at that time, which entailed climbing the highest mountain on each continent. Six years later, at 23, he passed away during a base jumping incident in the Swiss

Alps. Before his tragic death, Strange spent a period of time in Bhutan that moved the young man. Strange Sr. personally funded the construction of the country's first skate park in honour of his son's memory.

STRANGE TIMES IN BHUTAN

Strange first came to Bhutan to summit Gangkhar Puensum, Bhutan's highest peak at 24,835 feet, widely reported to be the world's highest unclimbed mountain. All previous attempts to scale the peak by mountaineering troupes from Europe and Asia had met with defeat. In 1994, Gangkhar Puensum was officially declared off limits by the Bhutanese government. Strange was intrigued, and at the behest of an ESPN employee, he sought permission to climb the mountain, recalled his father. Although his request was denied, Strange spent six months in Bhutan, teaching young kids how to skate and helping the country's Olympic Committee develop adventure sports programmes, as per his official blog.

Dressed in a traditional gho and black sneakers, Strange wandered through Bhutan armed with a longboard and an infectious smile. YouTube videos of the confident Californian during his sojourn give the impression that he was perpetually enwreathed by a posse of red robed-children. "Johnny loved the people of Bhutan, particularly the kids who (Strange described as) always smiling and happy," said his father.

After his demise, Strange Sr.

made sure to pay homage to his son's relationship with Bhutan. At first, he grappled for a way to honour his son's legacy. He wanted to create something that honoured youth and the outdoors. Ultimately, he decided to build two skate parks, one in Bhutan and another in his native Malibu. In doing so, he laid the ramp for a new history and culture for Bhutan's young.

THE SPIRIT LIVES ON

As winter thawed around Thimphu, I spent a sunny Saturday afternoon at the skate park, chatting with various skaters alongside a team of translators. A lot of the children there didn't know about Strange. All they knew was that somehow, someone decided to grace the far reaches of their city with a novelty that has infused their weekends with new purpose.

Once again, the chorus of, "Acho (big brother), please play with us!" rang out. This time the little skaters targeted my friends for tips, hoping they might glean something better from them than my frantic four seconds on the board. I moved to the stone cut-out of the Seven Summits placed at the centre of the park. I leaned against it, and observed.

I thought of Johnny Strange, the wild child from Malibu. I imagined him in his element, lounging on a billowing cloud snagged on a Himalayan peak, watching the children below make skateboarding as fun as it was truly intended to be. ✂



Perched on the banks of the Tejo River in Belém, Padrão dos Descobrimentos is a 170-foot monument that pays tribute to Portugal's Age of Discovery. Equally notable here are the custard tarts (bottom) served at Pastéis de Belém since 1837.

THE LONG AND SHORT OF LISBON

WILD WALKS, WAREHOUSE CAFÉS AND STREET ART IN THE CAPITAL BY MARIËTTE DU TOIT-HELMBOLD

With its crooked streets packed full of character and charm, Lisbon is the "big little city" you won't want to leave.

NATURAL WONDER

The Jardim do Parque das Nações is a green belt within the city itself, designed to create the largest continued green area in the city. Gardens with beautiful indigenous and exotic vegetation, cafés, and the riverside walkways make for an enchanting backdrop where locals and visitors love to congregate. As far as truly natural wonders go, the Tejo (Tagus) River is an impressive sight. Take a ferry or a wildlife tour down the river and you might even spot the dolphins.



NATIONAL PARK

The Pena Palace and Park located in the Sintra Mountains is a must visit. The park was developed at the same time as the palace by King Fernando II and Baron von Kessler and is the epitome of 19th-century Romanticism. The palace is at the centre of the park which spreads across 200 hectares of forest with a labyrinth of paths and narrow roads that connects the palace to the many other points of interest in the park. The park includes the Tapada do Mocho and the Moorish Castle and is enclosed by a stone wall. More than 500 species of trees from all over the world are in the park, which together with the extraordinary complex of parks, gardens, palaces, country estates,

monasteries, and castles makes the cultural landscape of Sintra a UNESCO World Heritage site protected by national legislation since 1995.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

The most significant archaeological site in Portugal is Foz Côa, a UNESCO World Heritage site with more than a hundred glacier-scrubbed panels containing at least 5,000 zoomorphic engravings of animals and etched symbols. The 30 discovered rock art sites are considered some of the most important in the world. Foz Côa is the area around the Coa River Valley and can be reached via any of the three villages of Vila Nova de Foz Coa, Muxagata, or Castelo Melhor. Visitors can book a tour from one of the Archaeological Park's three visitor centres. Bookings must be made at least a week in advance as access is only with a four-wheel-drive tour to one of the sites.

UNESCO SITE

There is no shortage of UNESCO sites in Portugal. For wine lovers, the enchanting Douro Valley UNESCO site is a must-experience. The descendants of the original landowners have produced wine in this ancient valley for more than 2,000 years. It is the oldest demarcated wine region in the world. The deep valleys, carved by river and man, create the perfect climate for the terraced vineyards where, with knowledge handed down from one generation to the next, world famous ports and wines are being made. Wine



Placed in a converted industrial complex, LX Factory (top) is filled with graffiti and houses over 50 hip shops, coffee joints, restaurants and bars; The terraced vineyards of Douro Valley (bottom) are a UNESCO site and home to dozens of quintas (wine estates).

tourism is on the rise in Portugal with more and more vineyards open to the public offering unique tasting experiences and tours.

CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

Lisbon is wildly colourful and creative with a growing urban and street art scene that tells its own stories about the city, whether in protest or purely for its aesthetic appeal. Check out

Like the rest of Lisbon, Marvila comes to life after dark. Be warned though—locals can party until lunchtime the next day

“Banksy meets Damien Hirst” street art by the Portuguese artist Alexandre Farto, known by the tag name Vhils. His work is represented in several countries now in private and public collections. You will see one of his most famous pieces near the entrance to LX Factory, certainly the coolest place to hang out in Lisbon. It is an old strip of factory buildings that now house an eclectic mix of trendy restaurants, designer shops, and independent creatives.

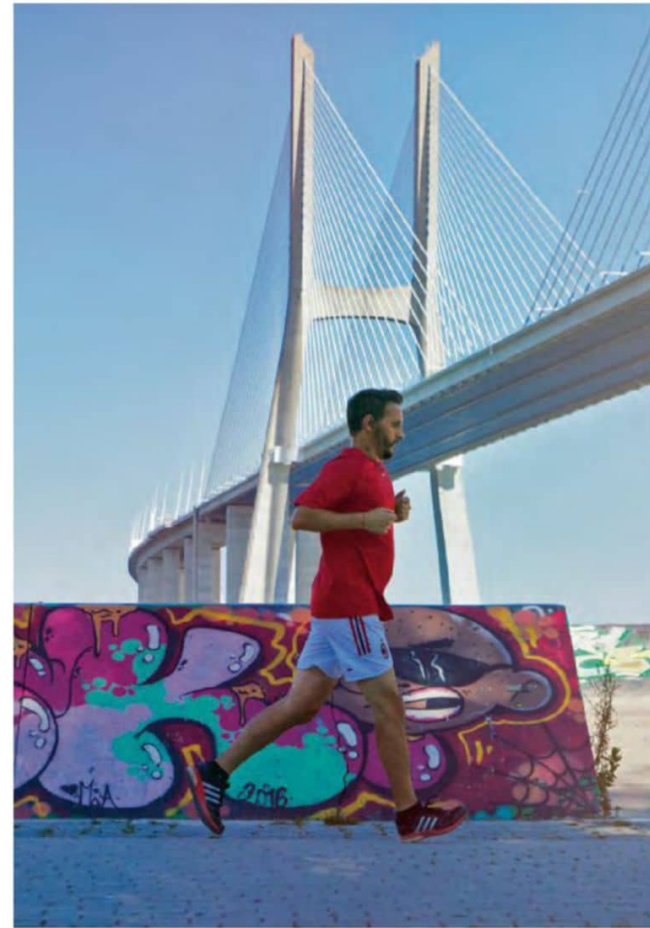
BEST DAY TRIP

Évora is a beautiful Alentejo city and another UNESCO World Heritage site where you can enjoy some of the best food in Portugal. Steeped in history with whitewashed houses, ochre, and granite, and a historic centre encircled by a ring of medieval walls, it is hard to believe that people actually live here. It is also a university town with students making up 10,000 of its 50,000-odd inhabitants. For wine lovers, Colares is a seaside wine region where sand-plant, phylloxera-resistant vines still exist. This charming walled town in the heart of the Alentejo wine region is a great escape for culture and cuisine lovers.

OFF THE BEATEN PATH

Skip the crowded and touristy Rossio plaza and wander through the cobbled streets of the up-and-coming Marvila neighbourhood with its art galleries and artisan breweries. The new

THE ITINERARY PORTUGAL



The Vasco da Gama Bridge (left) in Lisbon is the second longest bridge in Europe at just over 17 kilometres in length; Palácio Nacional da Pena (right) is a colourful palace built in the early 20th century in a smorgasbord of architectural styles.

cool district with many old warehouses being transformed into co-working spaces, skating rinks, artisan breweries, and art galleries, the neighbourhood is home to Fabrica Moderna, a factory where ideas are transformed into products. Like the rest of Lisbon, Marvila comes to life after dark with a variety of bars and eateries. If you're looking for an after-party, EKA is the place to go. Be warned though—locals can party until lunchtime the next day.

MOST ICONIC PLACE

Make sure that you include a visit to Belém, the historic heart of Lisbon, located at the mouth of the Tagus River. This is where legendary Portuguese explorers set sail from. You can get there by tram or better yet, get a boat from the river station to Lisbon's gateway to the Atlantic sea for beautiful views of the city from a different

perspective. The Belém Ferry is much cheaper than one of the boat tours and crosses to Porto Brandao on the southern side of the Tejo. Take a walk along the Tejo estuary between the Padrão dos Descobrimentos and the Torre de Belem and then reward yourself with a few sweet *pastéis de nata* (Portuguese custard tarts) from the traditional home of this local delicacy, the Pastéis de Belém.

LATE NIGHT

Lisbon never sleeps. So, if you want to experience Lisbon's nightlife, base yourself in the bohemian neighbourhood of Bairro Alto. It is a quiet corner of Lisbon during the day, but is transformed into one big party at nightfall with late night shopping, many great traditional and international restaurants, Fado houses, and too many bars to choose from. It is a popular weekend



destination and you will find locals and visitors bar-hopping till the early hours of the morning.

HISTORIC SITE

The great monastery Mosteiro dos Jerónimos was built by King Manuel I in 1496 in celebration and to give thanks to the Virgin Mary for Vasco de Gama's successful voyage to India. It is one of the most beautiful examples of Manueline architecture, unique to Portugal with Gothic, Moorish, and Renaissance influences and maritime details. The Jerónimos Monastery contains the tombs of Portuguese royalty and many important figures from Portuguese history, most famous among them, Vasco De Gama. While in the area, also visit the nearby Tower of Belém, also part of the World Heritage Site and a monument of Portugal's maritime accomplishments. ✕

THE ADDRESS



44

GALLE OF FAME

Awarded by UNESCO for its restoration efforts, Galle Fort Hotel provides plenty of room to degust Sri Lankan staples in a Dutch setting

PHOTO COURTESY: GALLE FORT HOTEL

48 ABODE AHANGAMA: THE HOUSE THAT BOMBAY BUILT

THE ADDRESS

GALLE OF FAME



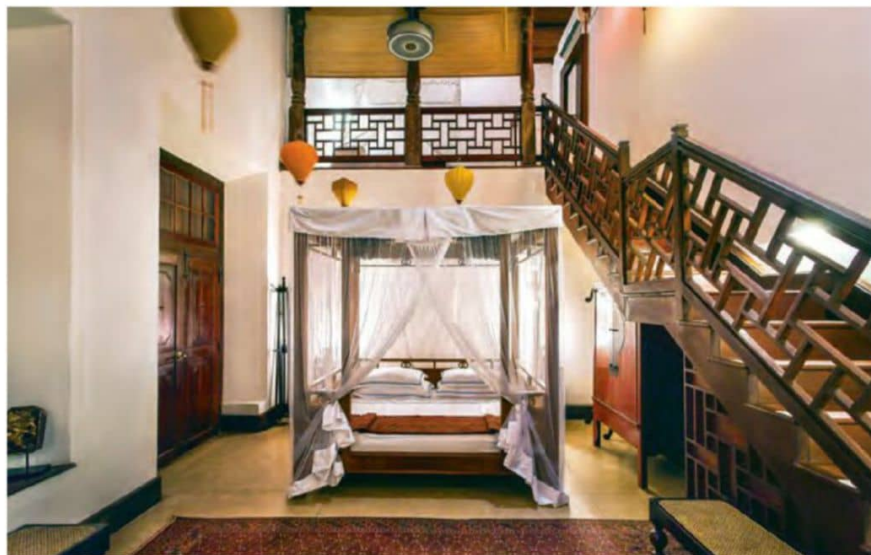
44 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRAVELLER INDIA | JUNE 2019

AWARDED BY UNESCO FOR ITS
RESTORATION EFFORTS, GALLE FORT
HOTEL PROVIDES PLENTY OF ROOM
TO DEGUST SRI LANKAN STAPLES IN A
DUTCH SETTING

BY LUBNA AMIR



All the rooms at Galle Fort Hotel come with a four-poster bed (bottom), and surround the colonnaded, open-air courtyard (facing page); A tuk-tuk ride (top) is a must in Galle.



No trip to Sri Lanka is complete without a customary halt at the Galle Fort, my sister proclaimed. That it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site studded on the southern tip of the teardrop nation further tipped the scales in her favour. Non-compliance on my part would not only have been foolish but was also unwarranted, given the occasion in sight—a much-awaited, painstakingly planned 10-day sistercation across Galle, capital Colombo, and the laid-back mountain town of Ella.

Abidingly, I booked two nights at the Galle Fort Hotel, a boutique property inside Galle's historic fort.

We enter the 17th-century fort in a colourful tuk-tuk and are instantly transported back in time. Fringed by coral-granite ramparts that withstood the tsunami and a 59-foot-tall lighthouse at its heart, Galle looks gregariously glorious, accommodative of the buildings, vibrant cafés and cutesy shops that reside within its 130 acres. As we further drive inwards on a balmy September afternoon, flashes from Puducherry's French Quarter come alive: a black Ambassador here, a gelateria there, and everywhere the roar of the ocean. And in the middle of it all stands the Galle Fort Hotel, more subtle than stately in its appearance.

Like the rest of the fort, the original structure of the hotel dates back to 17th century. It used to be a Dutch merchant's house and warehouse, then went to the British and a gem merchant, and finally lay abandoned post 1950. When the hotel opened in 2003, it became a shining example of restoration. I can see why. The main entrance is lined with potted palms and louvre doors, offering privacy to guests dining in the verandah. Inside, it's all wooden and white, with wall installations made out of pretty porcelain plates. The high-vaulted wooden ceilings and chandeliers are a fixture throughout the hotel, as is the antique furniture. It's the courtyard I love the most though—colonnaded, redolent with frangipani, with a pool in the centre. Like Indian *baris*, the rooms are built to overlook this central area; an architectural input that only triples the hotel's old-world charm.

THE ADDRESS

We walk through a naturally lit corridor lined with settees to enter our Loft Suite. It's a lovely split-level suite with a sitting room on the ground floor and a short staircase leading up to a bedroom with a cosy, four-poster bed. There are creature comforts like air-conditioners and modern bathrooms, but no distractions like televisions. Relaxing is to be done the old-fashioned way here—take a dip in the pool, or lounge with a book (there's a small collection for guests to borrow from in the lobby). Better yet, follow the advice of the staff and park yourselves at the ramparts for a theatrical sunset. The sky is painted in stunning hues of crimson, orange and violet, all in the span of half an hour.

At night, we sleep like babies in the downy bed and wake up ready to conquer Galle.

We fortify ourselves with a coma-inducing Sri Lankan breakfast: platters of string hoppers (think *idiyappam*) and egg hoppers (fluffier versions of *appam* with a fried egg in their bowl-like centre), served with a lip-smacking coconut-based chicken curry and a spicy coconut-and-chilli accompaniment called *pol sambol*.

Finally, we set out to explore our surroundings (spoiler: you can cover everything in half a day!). Souvenir shops are dime a dozen, but we ignore those, and step in Barefoot, a local brand selling on-loom woven, geometric-patterned fabrics and clothes, indigenous foods (raid their treacle) and handicrafts. From the fruit seller at the fort gates, we buy a dozen ripe,

purple mangosteens; the luscious, creamy fruit's juice dribbles down our chins, leaving us with fingers stickier than we had accounted wet wipes for. What follows is a mandatory photo op by the sea, and a free-flowing chat with gem merchants about the precinct's—and the hotel's—restoration. Amongst the clutch of boutique properties, Galle Fort Hotel is the only UNESCO-awarded hotel. The once derelict building was brought down with utmost care to its bare bones (some walls still have coral as part of their base), and rebuilt.

Later, as we settle in the main lobby, nursing a refreshing passion fruit-coconut mocktail, I idly flip through a coffee table book detailing the refurbishment process. I look around, comparing the what-was to what-is, and am content. We are, after all, reliving the luxurious life of the Dutch in the 21st century, and that is more than either of us could hope for. ✕

ESSENTIALS

The Galle Fort Hotel is a boutique hotel with 14 rooms (www.galleforhotel.com; doubles from ₹17,500, including breakfast and taxes). They all have four-poster beds, and are unique. The Loft Suites are split level; the Admiral Cheng Ho suite is dedicated to the Chinese explorer who visited Galle in the 14th century; the Porcelain Suite has a collection of Dutch pottery; and the ornate Grand Apartments used to once be the home of a gem merchant.

The fort ramparts are ideal for watching the dramatic sunset. The many hues—crimson, violet and orange—of the sky are reflected in the ocean.

ANA AMIR
PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHOTO COURTESY, GALLE FORT HOTEL (ROOM & POOL).
EFESKO/SHUTTERSTOCK (TUKTUK)

THE HOUSE THAT BOMBAY BUILT

Abode Ahangama, a roomy beach property along the Sri Lankan coast, harks back to the boutique brand's charming space in Colaba

BY RAJNI GEORGE

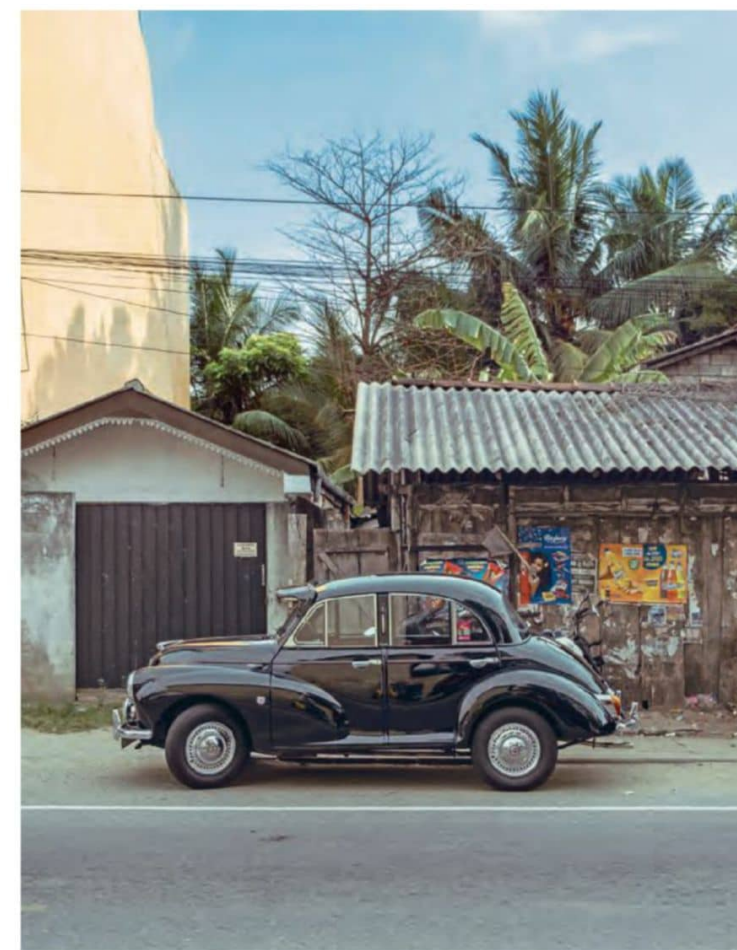
Among several newcomers on the gorgeous southern coastline of Sri Lanka this year is Abode Ahangama, a small property with an India connection located 45 minutes away from Galle Fort. A skilfully renovated house, originally designed by a Norwegian architect in the 1950s, the place has four operational rooms at the moment, a central living space with a communal dining table around which residents gather for breakfast, and an outdoor veranda framed by a stunning driftwood lamp from Essajee, a fourth generation antique furniture warehouse from Mumbai.

Facing page: Abode Ahangama has a minimalist design evident in its pristine white-walled rooms (bottom left), pastel upholstery and elegant antiques; Though the property is tucked away from the beach, visitors can relax indoors by its 60-foot swimming pool (top); Ahangama is a quiet town that attracts surfers and yoga practitioners (bottom right).

PHOTO COURTESY: ABODE AHANGAMA



SRI LANKA





The property has been left uncluttered with limited furniture, most of which bears influences of pieces from the Bombay boutique hotel.

Ahangama, a small town beloved by both surfers and yoga practitioners, is home to what locals will swear are some of the most scenic beaches on the island. Abedin Sham is the co-founder of Abode along with Lizzie Chapman. He has had his eye on Sri Lanka since 2015. “Some friends had purchased a little plot here, and began talking about this little town that wasn’t completely overrun with villas, and a nice little ecosystem that was developing. Galle, along with Unawatuna, Weligama, and Thalpe, is fairly saturated. They are all great destinations, but I wanted to show the local landscape, which I feel is missing in Galle,” he says.

Abode Bombay has earned a reputation for its boutique approach to hospitality, using an emphasis on local craftsmanship and environmentally friendly practices to make its mark. At their new property, Abedin and his father, Essa Sham of Abode have collaborated with Christian Krollig to extend their brand outside India. The resultant space is peaceful and full of an elegant synergy. Tucked away from the main road—a five-minute walk to a view of the ocean and brief tuk-tuk ride to an accessible shoreline—Abode isn’t the ideal location for those who want to wake up with a sea view, but the distance makes sense if quiet is a priority.

Restful and tastefully appointed, Abode’s rooms are an oasis. Each room features a stylish queen-sized bed with a modern frame; all products are bespoke, made from recycled wood and metal. Abedin worked with various small local vendors in Sri Lanka on a lot of the furniture: beds, chests, writing desks, towel rods and antique chairs. As the local workers’ capacity was limited, the number of pieces they could produce was limited, so the team combined efforts with workers in India. “We worked with the same carpenters that worked on our property in Bombay,” says Sham.

There is a great sense of space throughout, and simple, functional outdoor bathrooms complete the effect—showers by

the banana trees after a beach day, the clear, blue sky overhead. My room opened out onto a private verandah, with a table and two comfortable cloth chairs—perfect for early morning yoga and tea, before a breakfast of shakshuka and Sri Lankan hoppers. A 60-foot swimming pool, shaded by trees, and spa treatment rooms offer space for further relaxation.

Beach-wise, Kabalana is the best stretch of sand to spend your afternoon at, though you may have to dodge surfers if swimming is all you are after. If you are a surfer, or want to begin, here is the ideal place to practice or learn. A drink or meal at Timeless Villa, any time of the day, as well as Dreamsea, a sleek, seaside property with a bar and café, will allow you to camp out on the sand and dip in and out of the water. Restaurants like the excellent casual eatery Sticks and the surfer hangout Mama’s (best for a casual snack but full of colourful visitors and locals) are great to visit, nearby and in Midigama.

The group plans 10 more rooms and an all-day dining area, as well as an upcoming beach venue called the Abode Beach Project, featuring a café-bar. As a venue, it proved to be the kind of space that, by virtue of functionality and simplicity, is one I would return to. ✂

Essentials

To reach Abode Ahangama from Colombo, visitors can take a taxi or train, or drive over from Galle, which is 45 minutes north of Ahangama. The property has four rooms, including one suite (*doubles from \$80/₹5,565 with breakfast, taxes extra; abodeboutiquehotels.com*).

PHOTO COURTESY: ABODE AHANGAMA

THE DESTINATION

82

THE EUROPE WOLF DOWN

Parisian croque-monsieurs, soused herring in Amsterdam, or a roaring Irish gin—food tours across Europe to guide you through a storm of flavours



PHOTO COURTESY: STREATY

52 ON PONDICHERRY’S PLATTER • 60 AN APPETITE FOR LAOS • 74 ROADIE RELISH IN NEW ZEALAND

88 LOS ANGELES ON MY PLATE

THE DESTINATION

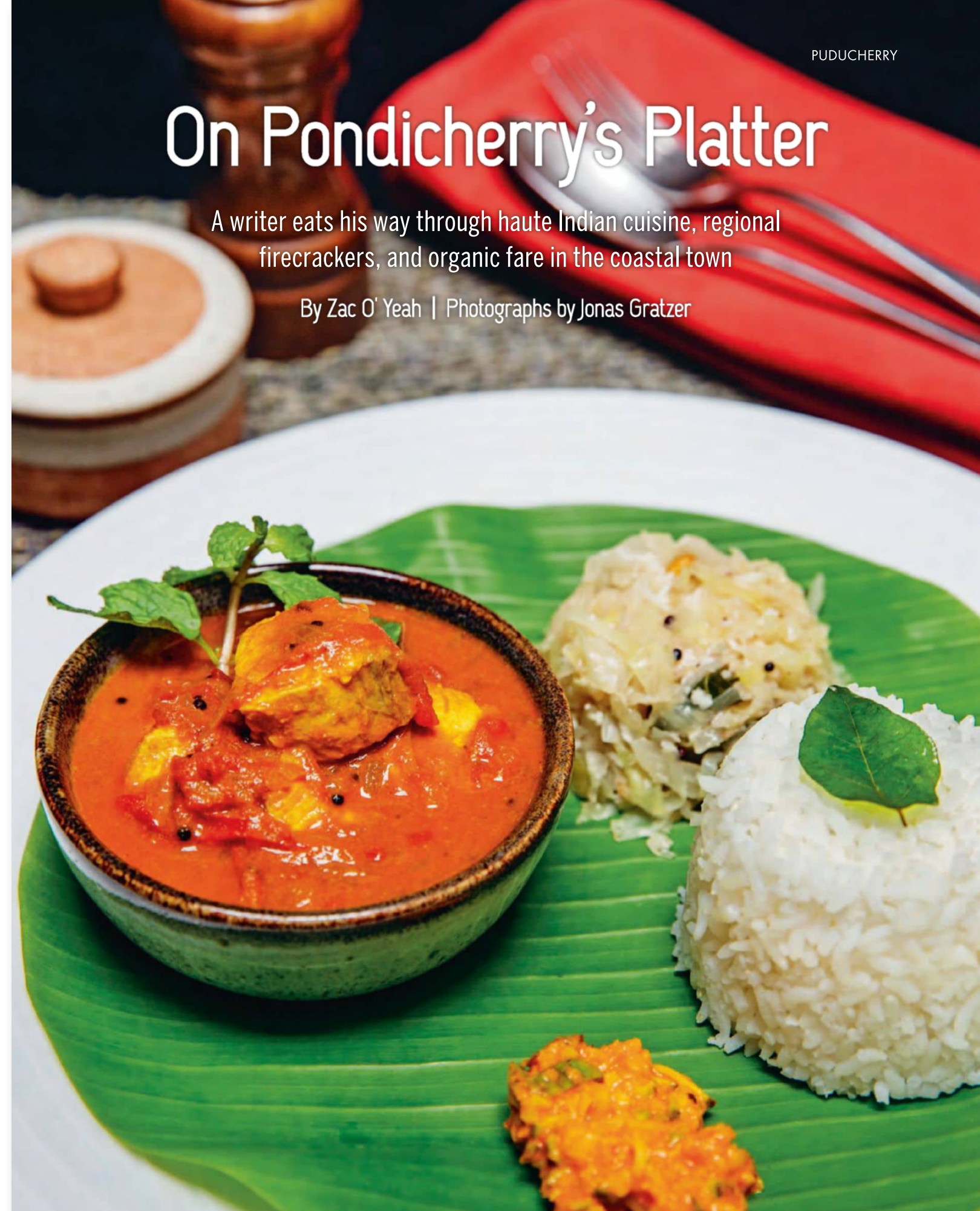
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PUDUCHERRY

On Pondicherry's Platter

A writer eats his way through haute Indian cuisine, regional firecrackers, and organic fare in the coastal town

By Zac O' Yeah | Photographs by Jonas Gratzner



Visiting Pondicherry is like taking

a bite out of the tastiest parts of Europe—spiced up to match Asian sensibilities, it's a veritable paradise for lovers of Euro-Med-Asian fusion.

The French have left an occidental esprit behind: street names are still prefaced with Rue, the leafy avenues are lined with plenty of heritage buildings called Maison something or the other, and policemen wear red pillboxy French caps. I feel like I'm inside a Tintin comic or starring in *Life of Pi* (the novel, incidentally, starts with a scene at the atmospheric **Indian Coffee House** adjacent to the colourful Goubert Market and where one gets lovely egg *dosai* for ₹55).

With an economy increasingly dependent on tourism, there's a pressing need to preserve architectural heritage. Even new constructions are built to blend in, I notice as I check into **Palais de Mahé** on 239 Rue de Bussy. Although its elegant rooms have all mod cons, every detail down to the wrought-iron door keys bespeaks of heritage mindedness.

The gourmet fare at the hotel's airy roof terrace restaurant **Les Alizés** is close to flawless—chef N. Kathir excels at dishes influenced by Kerala cuisine. The kokum-marinated fish grilled in banana leaf wraps, he says, is just like it's done in Mahé (erstwhile French colony in Kerala); the prawns in mango-coconut curry eaten with fluffy appams are sublime. But even better is his Indian-style haute cuisine, or what he calls “progressive cuisine.” Dishes to die for include the garlic-marinated medium-rare steak in a peppery sauce served alongside taro root wedges tempered with mustard seeds and a touch of chilli; I'm floored by a fennel-and-lime-crusted kingfish fillet accompanied by a Catalan paprika sauce and spicy yam; and reach nirvana when I sample grilled curry-marinated tiger prawns with traditional lemon rice and stir-fried creamy babycorn. All the gourmet dishes are about ₹600 per plate which is the best VFM ever.

Between meals, the town is perfect for a Proustian stroll to build up appetite—I turn the corner into the charming Rue Romain Rolland, named after a long-ago French winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. It is lined by a library, a theatre with an old Pathe-Cine-Familial sign still intact over the gate, and a great number of hangouts such as **La Maison Rose** (8 Rue Romain Rolland), a café-cum-cocktail bar in a salmon-coloured colonial mansion which also houses a cool bookshop. The lunch menu, with everything from Thai-flavoured stir-fried calamari and Japanese crispy prawns tempura, to Mediterranean hummus and tzatziki, is particularly recommendable for its mango pad thai salad (₹380) that comes with chilli rice noodles, sprouts and greens in a sweet and sour dressing. It goes well with a pork chop-stuffed sourdough sandwich (₹340). After the walk I reward myself with a banana lassi at the 24/7-open **Le Café**,

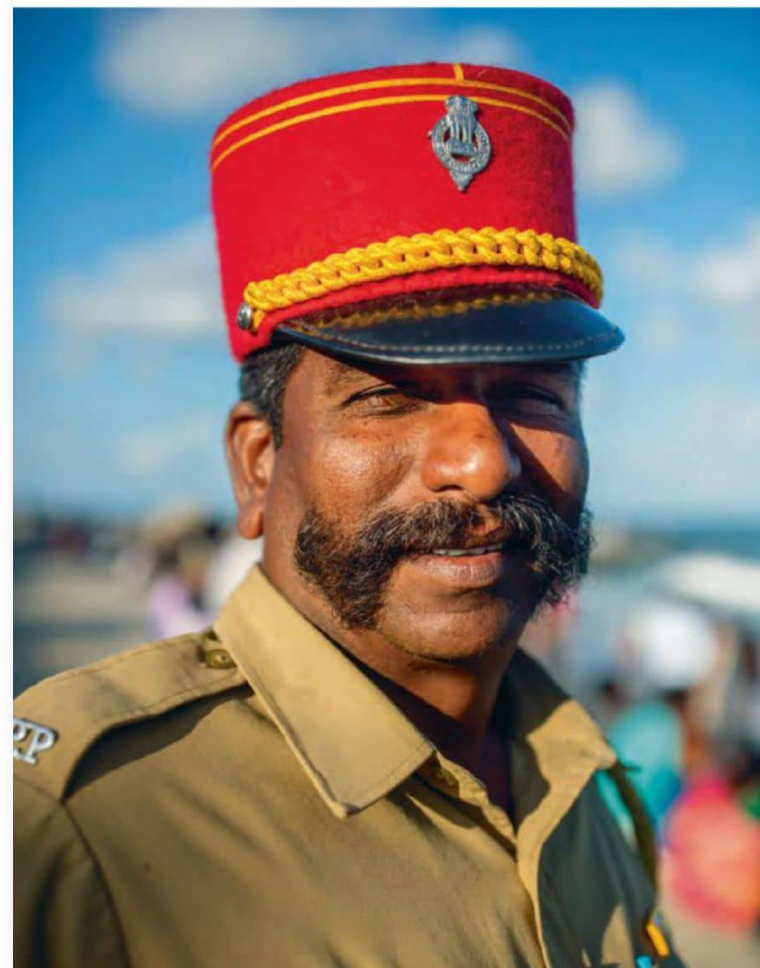
housed in the former harbour office with amazing ocean views and a cool breeze.

Pondicherry is one of the best Indian towns for pizza love where authenticity and affordability combines into amazing hogging. **Xtasi Gastropub** (28 Rue de Bussy) is famous for wood-fired pizzas, including vegetarian pizzas topped with aubergine and zucchini. Cocktails can also be ordered in any size, I notice as three sozzled girls at the next table down a pitcher of Bacardi. I make do with a pint and order a seafood pizza—topped with generous chunks of fish, black olives and veggies, all smothered in cheese—and while eating away I observe a girl entering in burka, walk into the restroom, come out in jeans and tank top, and order herself a beer. It's very à la Pondicherry. A more classic selection of traditional Italian gourmet pizzas (at only ₹300) can be found at **Tanto Trattoria** (Auroville Main Road), worth the 10 kilometre trip out to Auroville also for its fine pastas and risottos, as well as organic ravioli. They sell their own tagliatelle coloured red with beetroot or green from spinach.

When I tire of eating, I pop into the **Aurobindo ashram** (Rue de la Marine) for some silent meditation, the newly opened **Police Museum** (4 Rue Dumas) with its collection of quaint uniforms and weapons, and the **Pondicherry Museum** (49 Rue Saint Louis) with a jumble of things the French left behind—foodies might be interested in the mock-up of a colonial dining room including special wine cabinets. The museum also has Roman and Chinese antiques, such as shards from first century amphorae for transporting Mediterranean wines and Sung dynasty porcelain with pale blue patterns on white glazing, attesting to the city's ancient interest in foreign eating habits—and to think, that was thousands of years before the arrival of the French!

After a few days in the European part of town, I shift to the Tamil quarters and the charming **Maison Perumal** (58 Perumal Koil Street), a 130-year-old merchant's mansion turned into a stylish boutique hotel. In its courtyards, local artists exhibit their work and the cheerful chef COUGARBABU, who spells his name with capital letters and is a born and bred Puducherrian, puts together an elaborate tasting menu of regional specialties. Entrées consist of *vazhapoo vadai* (fritters made of banana flowers served with a coconut dip), *khuzipaniyaram* (lentil stew with delicious spongy rice balls), and for mains I sample *karuvepillai varutha meen*—mahimahi filets baked in coconut leaves with a sweet-and-sour sauce of jaggery, chilli and tamarind; *era podi thooval* (shrimp sautéed with 'gunpowder' mixture) and *parla meen kohzambhu*, which is bluefish curry—altogether taking the art of cookery to a heavenly level.

Pondicherry is a delicious buffet for the senses. A hot coffee at the iconic Indian Coffee House (top right) will set you back a mere ₹20. Markets peddle everything from fresh flowers (top left) to seafood. Before hitting the restaurant circuit, take a walk at Goubert Market to check out fresh catch (bottom right) from the coast; Policemen in Pondy still sport the typical red, very-French *kepi* (bottom left). Previous spread: The colonial architecture of Pondicherry's streets is interspersed with old Hindu temples (left). It is easy to visualise the two sides of a historical coin: a city where Frenchmen and Tamilians lived side by side for almost 300 years. *Parla meen kohzambhu* (bluefish curry) (right) served at Maison Perumal is a delicious start to discovering the city.





Watching the city wind down from the rooftop bar at Hotel Ajantha Seaview at Goubert Avenue is one of Pondicherry's loveliest sights; *Khuzi paniyaram*, a lentil stew with utterly yummy, spongy rice balls is a signature dish of chef Cougarbabu at Maison Perumal (facing page).



No matter how many hip cafés and artsy types flood Pondicherry, some old habits and morning rituals in temples will always defy the passage of time; Food at the restaurant, *Les Alizés* (facing page), is a deft mix of Indian and European flavours, such as this fennel-and-lime-crusted kingfish fillet resting on a bed of spicy yam and veggies, all topped by a Catalan paprika sauce.

Raising the Bar

Pondicherry happens to be one of the best towns in India to go out for a drink: bars are a dime a dozen and drinking is dirt cheap.

Rock-bottom options include a surplus of popular bars such as the friendly **Poudou-Poudou** (31 Rue Labourdonnais) which also has a decent seafood menu, **De Bussy Permit Room** (81 Lal Bahadur Shastri Street) is great for tandoori snacks to go with your drink, and the old-world **Amnivasam Factory Price Retail Outlet Budget Bar** (corner of Montorsier and Capitane Marius Xavier Streets) is perhaps the cheapest of all for an ice-cold beer. These are slightly

male hangouts.

For a sea view and environs more suited to female revellers, head to **Seagulls** (19 Rue Dumas) or the rooftop bar at **Hotel Ajantha Seaview** (50 Goubert Avenue). **Rendez-vous** (30 Rue Suffren) is another youthful place which offers decent bar grub.

My personal all-time favourite is **Hotel Dhanalakshmi Urvasi Roof Garden** (59 Rangapillai Street), on the upper floor of a mansion with a balcony that overlooks the street making it the perfect perch for people-watching. Despite a certain seediness, this is an easygoing haunt with uncles in loincloths sipping hard drinks while a

bunch of youth sing, 'Happy birthday to Thambi.' There's even a squirrel that tries to jump into my beer mug while I'm distracted by the delectable snacks such as the 'prawn-fish munch' (₹200) which is exactly what it sounds like—a hearty mix of fish and prawns fried with spices and veggies.

For those wishing to dress up, flashier bars include **The Storytellers'** in the hep **Le Promenade hotel** (23 Goubert Avenue) and other star hotel bars, though the loveliest cocktail bar in town has to be **Bombali** (7 Rue Labourdonnais) which also features an extensive *dimsum* menu—if you tire of all the French fusion. ✂



an APPETITE *for* LAOS

The complexity,
grace, and taste of
Luang Prabang unfurl
one delicious
bite at a time

The Nam Ou river was once a major transport route, bringing people and produce from northern Laos to Luang Prabang.

By Andrew Nelson Photographs by Ewen Bell



LUANG PRABANG

BUFFET

1 PLATE 1 TIME

BIG PLATE 10,000 KIP
SMALL PLATE 5,000 KIP

DRINKS

BIG BEER LAO 10,000 KIP
DAI BEER 10,000 KIP
BIG CAN BEER 10,000 KIP
SMALL CAN BEER 8,000 KIP
PEPSICAN 7,000 KIP
BIG WATER 6,000 KIP
SMALL WATER 3,000 KIP
SPRING ROLL 1,000 KIP
FRIED BREAD

THANK YOU FOR COMING
TO SUPPORT!

SOMETIMES A PORTAL ISN'T A DOOR. IT'S A BOWL OF SOUP.

Raise a spoonful of *tom kha kai*, a traditional Laotian coconut chicken soup, to your lips, and a tantalising perfume of lemongrass, lime, and galangal wafts upward. Its scent is sublime and earthy, hot and sour. The fragrant plume comes with a peppery kick. The sensation is vivid, somehow poignant, and utterly transporting.

The memory brings a smile as I stand in a line of passengers at Luang Prabang airport, in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. I've

travelled more than 14,000 kilometres to Southeast Asia inspired by Van Nolintha, a charismatic 32-year-old Laotian-American restaurateur in Raleigh, North Carolina, whose inventive renditions of his childhood dishes from his native land have earned the acclaim of diners and food critics alike.

Now I've come for a taste of the real thing. Upon leaving the airport, my first views of Laos are the Phou Thao and Phou Nang mountain ranges, which surround the ancient royal city of Luang Prabang like an embrace. The slopes are lush with trees that comb and catch the low-lying clouds. As I enter the city, a cluster of motorbikes overtakes my taxi, trailing fumes and impatience. A teenage girl, sitting side-saddle in a Laotian silk tube skirt called a *sinh*, flashes past. Her face is inches from her smartphone. She's texting furiously, oblivious to her young driver and the pushy traffic puddling up behind us, which includes four Toyota vans packed with Chinese tourists. Their wide-brimmed sun hats curl against the steamy windows.

Built on a peninsula formed by the confluence of the Nam Khan and Mekong rivers, the city was once an important Buddhist religious centre and seat of empire. From the 14th to the 16th centuries, it served as the capital of a state that called itself Lan Xang, or Kingdom of a Million Elephants. Princely wars and declining fortunes followed. In 1560 the Laotian



Luang Prabang's Night Market, along Sisavangvong Road, is known as a place where hungry travellers can enjoy an entire meal for less than ₹100. In addition to Laotian dishes, local beer, and tropical fruit shakes, vendors sell handicrafts, textiles, and souvenirs.

NG MAPS



capital was moved to Vientiane, though Luang Prabang retained its own king. Eventually Laos fell into European possession following the creation of the French protectorate in 1893. The French recognised Luang Prabang as the Laotian royal seat once more. Beside the ancient temples, a new Parisian-designed palace and French administrative buildings filled the historic core, now a UNESCO World Heritage site.

I locate my friend Van at Satri House, a former colonial mansion revived as a boutique hotel. He's in the courtyard, dangling his legs in the pool. "Do you like it here?" he asks as a bottle of chilled rosé appears. I do. Furnished with antiques, the 28-room property exudes serenity and lost grandeur. As if on cue, a buttercream—coloured Rolls-Royce glides past on the street beyond, with an elegant, white-haired Laotian woman seated in back. Who is she? Where is she going? There are mysteries in Luang Prabang. And, I come to learn, ghosts.

"My grandmother was named Mae Tao," Van tells me. "Growing up in Luang Prabang, I tended the family flower garden with her. She taught me that each flower had a life and personality, and how to cut, clean, and arrange each bloom in a certain manner," he says. "You are from Luang Prabang," she liked to say. "You should care about small details—they're sacred."

That attention to the little things would sustain Van, who grew up in this neighbourhood, in a small house, in another time, in a different Laos. The years following the American War (the Laotian term for the Vietnam War) brought turmoil to Luang Prabang. In 1975 the monarchy was overthrown, and Laos became a communist state.

For Van's family, the two decades following meant disruption, conflict, and hunger as Laos turned inward. He and his sister, Vanvisa, saw their parents struggle, but their hospitality was forever bountiful.

"We were so poor, but there was always someone visiting the house," he tells me. "There were always people at the table."

His parents fretted over their children's future. Should they send them away for an education, into a world they barely knew? Should they keep them close to home and tradition? In 1998, at age 12, Van left for America, and his sister soon followed. He would not see his home in Luang Prabang for six years.

In Greensboro, North Carolina, Van stayed with family friends and attended a public middle school. It was a difficult separation from all that he knew. He began cooking the food he remembered from Laos, determined not to forget the place he and his sister left behind. "I needed to make sure our

In vivid detail (from far left): water lilies blooming in the former Royal Palace ponds; some of the thousands of Buddha statues in the sacred Pak Ou Caves; painted roof battens in Wat Xieng Thong, Luang Prabang's most important temple; a marionette for sale at the Night Market.

memories of Luang Prabang were preserved," he says.

He listened to pop music and spoke English fluently, attended university in Raleigh on a scholarship, and studied design and chemistry. In 2004, like so many immigrants before them, Van and Vanvisa became U.S. citizens.

THE NEXT DAY, VAN INVITES ME for breakfast in the heart of the historic district on Sakkaline Road. We sit down at a family-run, open-air restaurant across from a gilded temple where monks clad in marigold orange robes whitewash the walls. An iron pot full of a tangle of rice noodles bubbles away, heated by a wood fire. The owner welcomes us with big broth-filled bowls and piles of fresh mint, basil, and lettuce leaves in a dozen shades of green. We spoon in *jeow bong* sauce—orange and scarlet and sweet and sour. Additional plates of sticky rice, bean sprouts, limes, and long beans, as well as small bowls of fish sauce and fermented shrimp paste, crowd the table. The bounty finds its way into our bowls. All is simple, yet with a complexity of flavour.

"Identity is in the very food you eat here," Van says. "It's profoundly important to Luang Prabang. Our cuisine is central to how we understand ourselves. Our sense of place and relationship to the sacred are found in the ingredients we harvest along the river and the food we cook at home."

What happens when you can no longer experience the food that so defines you, I wonder, knowing that with suitcases and ambitions, each wave of newcomers to U.S. shores brings memories and yearnings for a taste of home. According to a study by the National Restaurant Association, the top three global cuisines eaten in America—Chinese, Mexican, and Italian—are scarcely considered foreign anymore, as nine out of 10 Americans eat them. But only 20 percent of Americans have sampled cuisines such as Korean, Ethiopian, and Brazilian. Laotian food is so uncommon it didn't even make the list, but for Van and Vanvisa, it became their meal ticket. "How you tend your land is how you honour your family," says Van, who made the difficult choice to sell a piece of ancestral land to finance their restaurant in Raleigh.

In 2012 he and his sister opened Bida Manda (Sanskrit



Sisavangvong Road in Luang Prabang retains its colonial-era architecture and is a hub for casual cafés, tourist services, and French-style pastries.



for “father mother”) in a revitalised neighbourhood around the corner from the city’s bus station. The mix of Laos and Dixie created a sensation. Last year, with co-owner and brewer Patrick Woodson, the siblings opened Bhavana, a craft brewery and community café that introduced Raleigh’s techies and Tar Heels to the piquancy of Laotian delicacies like *mok pa*—aromatic steamed fish in a banana-leaf wrap, spiced with coconut curry and served with sticky rice—and handcrafted ales brewed with mangoes and peppercorns. Purple hydrangeas from the house flower shop and art books from the house bookstore grace its interior, which fills out a light-washed, warehouse-size space. As his grandmother said, it was all in the details. “A showstopper,” proclaimed *Bon Appétit*. Soon after, Bhavana was nominated for a James Beard award, the Oscar of edibles.

A LOVE FOR THE SMALL, artful moment infuses Luang Prabang in unexpected ways. Walking on a side street in the old city, I notice plumeria blossoms set carefully and reverently atop fence posts and doorstops, as offerings to the Buddha, a reminder of the city’s respect for gesture and the fusion of earth and spirit. I spot the creamy white blooms on a hotel-room nightstand and on the steps leading to the temples.

Plumerias become, for me, a sign not just of beauty but thoughtfulness.

At the base of Luang Prabang’s sacred Mount Phousi, I come across vendors selling songbirds in wicker cages. I learn that locals release them at the summit in front of the gilded wat, or temple, to receive good luck. It’s a beautiful gesture—one that glosses over the seeming cruelty to a trafficked species.

A tour of the former Royal Palace illustrates another of Luang Prabang’s traits: accommodation. The French commissioned this 1904 beaux arts pile for the Laotian king and paired it with local motifs such as the three-headed white elephant beneath a white parasol, the symbol of the monarchy, set in the pediment above the entrance. The throne room is decorated with mosaics of warriors and elephants in mirrored glass, arranged like refrigerator magnets on its scarlet walls.

I walk outside, past the tent sheltering a golden barge, and find something surprising in the royal garage: a white 1958 Ford Edsel, a gift from the U.S. government, awaiting a chauffeur who would never come. In 1975 the communists ordered the king’s family to reeducation camps—ending a 600-year-old lineage—and turned the home into a museum.

Market bounty (from far left): cooked river crabs bundled together by bamboo ties; frogs, which thrive in Laotian rice fields, and fish, displayed on mats of banana leaves; rounds of dried Bengal quince, a tropical fruit that locals steep for a medicinal tea; eggplants sold in batches for a little over ₹70.

The sun in Luang Prabang can be fierce. In the afternoon, darkened rooms and overhead fans soothe both travellers and geckos—the former seeking gin, the latter insects. In late afternoon, as the heat begins to cool, vendors arrive with their goods at the Night Market. I snake through their stands to the Mekong. By the time the cotton and silk scarves, embroidered textiles, silver bangles, and Beerlao T-shirts are unpacked and enticingly displayed, the sky has turned from lemon to a deepening indigo, and I am waiting for Van by the river.

He has rented a long, slender riverboat and invited a group of his friends aboard for an early evening cruise. He takes care of all the specifics. Staff offer amuse-bouches while we float downstream in the gathering twilight, watching the fishermen in their boats and admiring the vine-covered cliffs. The sky is soft, and Van’s friends grow quiet. The only noise is our motorboat sluicing through caramel water.

I imagine journeys from an earlier time, when the riverbanks were crowded with great jetties of bamboo and

towering teak and giant palms interspersed with cassia, rhododendrons, and catalpas, all of it dripping with orchids. The foliage hid tigers and rhinos—and also sapphires, copper, and gold, which floated down with the current to Luang Prabang to trade to the larger world.

“The Mekong is the heart of Laotian spirituality. It’s both Laos’s bloodline and livelihood,” Van says. “My grandmother’s and grandfather’s ashes were spread in Mother Kong, where their memories, hopes, and stories are kept.”

As romantic and enigmatic as it is, Luang Prabang is also part of the in-your-face 21st century. It is only becoming more intertwined with the wider world. The hammer and sickle still flutter from government buildings, and while citizens joke that the acronym for the People’s Democratic Republic stands for “Please Don’t Rush,” Laos is doing just that. Development has thinned those once exuberant forests, and the knotty jungle is being replaced by ordered rows of teak. The former Kingdom of a Million Elephants counts only a few hundred of them now.



"A big pot of pork broth and a few chairs are all you need to open a pho stall in Laos," says photographer Ewen Bell. Facing page: Riverside dining at Burasari Heritage hotel.





Early one morning, in a park at the promontory where the rivers meet, I pause to admire the dawn, only to jump with alarm as a megaphone erupts in Mandarin to beckon clattering Chinese visitors to assemble beneath a guide's flag. Tourist numbers are growing. Not just from China but from all over the world. Already foreigners outnumber locals at the traditional dawn alms-giving ceremony for the monks. Old, ornate, and delicate, Luang Prabang must guard against overtourism or else crumble under the invasion.

So I think the Nolinthas' effort to establish Luang Prabang's culinary traditions in Raleigh is important. It was daring to trade a plot of land in Laos for a promise of success in the United States. The last time I spoke with Van, I told him I worried about his old home. But he reassured me that the city's spirit is less fragile than it might appear at first.

"I'm uncertain of what Luang Prabang will become," he said. "But whatever happens, the city will always be a portrait of generosity, grace, and beauty. Guests will always be welcome at our table. After all, that is our way." ✂

Travel Wise:
Luang Prabang

GETTING THERE AND VISA
There are no direct flights between India and Luang Prabang. Flights from Mumbai and Delhi have at least one layover at Bangkok or Singapore. Indians can obtain a 30-day tourist visa on arrival in Laos (USD40/₹2,800; to be paid in cash; two passport-sized photos required).

NOT TO MISS
National Museum
Built in 1904, this palace museum offers a glimpse into the world of Laotian kings and their families. On the grounds: an opulent pavilion housing the Prabang Buddha and a garage holding mid-century American cars, gifts from the United States.

Night Market
Down the street from the former palace, sellers at the Night Market display both authentic Laotian crafts, such

as woven silk, embroidered textiles, and silver jewellery, as well as made-in-China offerings of Beerlao T-shirts.

Wat Xieng Thong
Known as the Golden City Temple, this 16th-century complex was built near the meeting of Luang Prabang's two rivers and is important as a religious and national symbol. It was here that Laotian kings were crowned.

Mount Phousi
The energetic can brave the humidity to climb the hill's 300-plus steps for a spectacular view of the city and its surroundings. A small 200-year-old stupa, or temple, sits atop the summit.

EAT
Le Banneton Café
This Paris-inspired boulangerie offers dark, rich coffee plus freshly baked pastries, baguettes, and croissants, a tradition from the French colonials.

Dyen Sabai
You need to cross the Nam Khan on a bamboo footbridge to get to this casual restaurant, but the trek is worth it for the river views and pork with fried eggplant.

LaoDerm Restaurant
Near where Sisavangvong becomes Sakkaline Road, LaoDerm serves Laotian comfort food—everything from crunchy, spicy som tam (green papaya salad) to crickets deep-fried with lime leaves and tossed with salt.

STAY
AVANI+ Luang Prabang
Sleek and chic, this five-star hotel built around a large pool affords easy access to the Night Market, located just across the street (minorhotels.com/en/avani/luang-prabang; doubles from LAK13,63,854/₹11,000)

Rosewood Luang Prabang
The Rosewood sits a bit out of town but pampers with a waterfall, an indulgent spa,

and wellness programmes (rosewoodhotels.com/en/luang-prabang; doubles from USD532/₹37,150).

Satri House
The antique-filled rooms, whitewashed walls, and reflecting pools accented with lotus blossoms evoke French Indochina (satrihouse.com; doubles from USD150/₹10,500)

Villa Santi
This boutique hotel housed in a French colonial villa has a prime location in the World Heritage district (villasanti hotel.com; doubles from USD143/₹10,000).

Go With Nat Geo
Nat Geo Expeditions offers a 15-day "Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia: Treasures of Indochina" itinerary that includes three nights in Luang Prabang. Guests visit the city's renowned shrines, experience a Buddhist baci ceremony, and go hiking in the countryside (www.natgeoexpeditions.in).

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Wat Choum Khong is one of dozens of small temples in the old town of Luang Prabang. Residents help support novice monks in their religious studies.

Roadie Relish in New Zealand

A road trip through South Island is a window into its cosmopolitan cuisine; think charcoal gelatos in Christchurch, chorizo-filled tacos in Wanaka, and gleaming green-lipped mussels plucked fresh off Wainui Bay

BY DANI REDD



PHOTO COURTESY: HAWKER & ROLL



TRAVELLINGLIGHT/ISTOCK/EDITORIAL/GETTY IMAGES

The trams of New Regent Street seize attention, but Christchurch's wild card is its cosmopolitan grub—spicy Spanish chorizo, saucy bowls of pork and beef meatballs, and Malaysian fare (facing page) big on local ingredients.

On Rollickin' Gelato's seasonal menu is charcoal blended with organic milk, studded with chunks of honeycomb; Facing page: In Wanaka, embrace crystalline lakes, sunbathing and bold Mexican flavours (top); Past the village of Twizel, a salmon farm offers dishes (bottom) such as poke, sashimi, sushi and chowder.



Most people come to New Zealand's South Island for the nature. We were no exception. In January, my husband Bikram and I spent three weeks driving across the region, swimming in glacial lakes, sleeping off the grid, and walking in national parks. However, as we travelled through its remote countryside and tourist hotspots, we discovered something that surprised us—a vibrant food scene, one where fresh local produce is used to rustle up dishes from across the globe.

In fact, from the very first day, New Zealand revealed unexpected culinary delights. Our first stop was the South Island's capital, Christchurch. We weren't taken aback by the vacant lots and buildings encased in scaffolding—we'd heard about the 2011 earthquake. What we weren't expecting was quite how buzzing Christchurch would be. As we sauntered down the sun-dappled streets, we discovered street theatre performers, craft markets, and best of all, a cosmopolitan dining scene.

Our first stop was the **Curator's House**, a Spanish restaurant in a heritage building nestled in Christchurch's Botanic Gardens. We ordered a tapas tasting platter, and sat in the shaded outdoor courtyard, which overlooked green lawns bordered by hydrangea. Six dishes arrived, including a bowl of succulent pork and beef meatballs, with a piquant mushroom sauce, and croquetas covered in a crispy panko-crumbs coating. But there was one clear winner—the home-made chorizo. Generous slices had been gently fried; the pork sausage-meat was tender and infused with paprika.

Later that day, we stopped at **Hawker & Roll**, a Malaysian street food joint with communal tables and brightly coloured stools. I ordered a beef rendang roll. The rich, sweet, mildly-spiced filling was complemented by a garnish of sliced red chilli, freshly grated coconut and coriander leaves, and wrapped in a flaky roti canai. My husband rated it as the best meal of the trip.

Next, we headed over to New Regent Street. The pedestrianised heritage streetscape looked like a set from a Wes Anderson movie, with its pastel Spanish Mission houses and trams. Here we discovered **Rollickin' Gelato**, an ice cream parlour with a queue out the door. We ordered one of the seasonal flavours, 'Coal 4 U'—activated charcoal blended with organic milk and studded with chunks of chocolate-coloured honeycomb (known in New Zealand as hokey pokey). The charcoal added a hint of bitterness to the vanilla.

SEAFOOD IN GOLDEN BAY

After recovering from jet lag, we drove out of Christchurch and up towards the scenic northern coast, stopping to cool off at a beach near Abel Tasman National Park. The rest of the country had the same idea. Lobster-red sunbathers occupied almost every inch of sand, and the seas heaved with people. We decided to get something to eat instead.

"There's a food truck. New Zealand's supposed to do great fish and chips," I said, and Bikram was game.

But the beer-battered squid rings and the panko-crusted fish burger failed to meet our expectations. The squid leaked oil and was rubbery and overcooked, while the dense bun marred the flavour of the fish. Luckily, this was the only

DANI REDD



PHOTO COURTESY: JULIA GRAY (AMIGOS); PHOTO COURTESY: FLORENCIA CARCAVALLO (BOWL)



Morning light plays the painter at Lake Tekapo against the Southern Alps; The author whipped up barbeque dinner of green-lipped mussels (facing page), indigenous to New Zealand.



CSP_NAUMOID/FOTOFESTOCK LIBRE/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY

culinary low point of our trip.

We drove onwards, following alarming hairpin bends over Takaka Hill to Golden Bay, where we were to stay in an off-the-grid cedar cabin overlooking an estuarine bay. After several days of kayaking, cycling and stargazing, we headed into the nearest town, Takaka, for lunch. The inhabitants hadn't received the memo that the '70s were over. Dreadlocked, tie-dyed hippies wandered barefoot past wholefood cafés and shops selling shapeless, colourful garments.

Despite being a former tie-dye wearer myself, I found this over-the-top hippie culture a tad overwhelming. We skipped lunch in Takaka. Instead we drove 10 minutes out of town to **Anatoki Salmon**, a place where tourists and locals throng to catch salmon from a lake, and have it smoked or sliced into sashimi. There is also a café that serves freshly caught fish. We ordered a salmon platter and sat under an awning overlooking the lake, watching as people tried to reel in their lunch with varying degrees of success. It wasn't long before a large, white plate full of salmon-based delicacies arrived. We tucked into crispy salmon croquettes, moist hot-smoked salmon and a creamy salmon pâté, spread liberally over soft ciabatta bread. But the salmon was so fresh it needed precious little adornment. My favourite were the thin slices of cold-smoked salmon, served with a soy sauce dip.

On our last day in the cedar cabin, we decided to walk a part of the Abel Tasman Coast Track, which meanders for over 63 kilometres through Abel Tasman National Park. After a few hours of following the trail along forested cliffs and turquoise bays, we cooled off with a dip at Wainui Bay, with only a few people around. As I walked towards the ocean, I saw a rock pool. Under the water lay a wooden spur encrusted in mussels. I returned to my husband with hands full of gleaming blue-black shells, studded with small white barnacles.

"You aren't going to eat those, are you?" he asked.

He has an intense distrust of anything I gather from the wild. Back in the cabin, I de-bearded the mussels, scrubbed the shells in the open-to-sky

RUSS BISHOP/AGEFOTOSTOCK LIBRE/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY





kitchen, and steamed them in white wine, garlic and cream. I ate them while watching the sun set, with a glass of locally produced Stoneleigh Chardonnay. Plucked from the sea only a few hours before, they were lightly salted, plump and tender.

FORAGING FOR FISH N’ CHIPS

We spent the next week driving down Highway 6, a scenic route along the island’s weather-beaten Wild West Coast. After a couple of days in the quirky town of Hokitika, we headed to the small village of Franz Josef, where we’d arranged to go skydiving. We also decided to hike Robert’s Point Track, a nine-kilometre return hike up to a viewing platform near a glacier face. Informed by guests at our hostel that it was an easy walk, we set out with a small bottle of water and a sandwich each, only to be met with a slightly concerning warning sign at the start of the route:

“Robert’s Point Track is only suitable for experienced, well-equipped trampers,” it read. And then further down the board, “Three people have died on Robert’s Point Track!”

“Don’t worry, nine kilometres won’t take five hours,” I reassured my husband.

It took longer. Last night’s rainfall had made the steep path slippery and hazardous.

Later, feeling faint with hunger, we headed to **The Gourmet Hangi Kitchen and Kiwi Fish & Chips**—a food truck in Franz Josef—and ordered some salt and pepper squid, and battered tarakihi and chips. Minutes later, we carried the warm, paper-wrapped parcel to our hostel. We ate on the balcony, looking out at dramatic grey clouds and forested hills. The tarakihi was crispy on the outside and soft and flaky on the inside. The squid was a real hit—large, tender chunks encased in a crispy, peppery coating. Finally, New Zealand was living up to its reputation for decent fish and chips.

SUSHI IN THE SOUTHERN ALPS

Our next stop was an Airbnb near Lake Hawea, a 20-minute drive from Wanaka. We spent a day reading in the sun-tinted garden, and swimming in the cold waters of Lake Hawea. The day after, we headed into Wanaka, the busiest town we’d visited since Christchurch. The lakeshore was fringed with sunbathers, the streets lined with shops, cafés and restaurants. We had lunch at **AmiGos Mexican Grill**, where we took full advantage of the two-for-one offer on all NZD6/₹275 tacos. We tucked into soft tacos filled with crispy calamari and spiced chorizo, sweet pulled duck with crispy skin and acidic slices of green apple, and fried chicken with sweetcorn salsa. A frozen margarita was the perfect accompaniment.

On the way home, we stopped at the supermarket. I caught sight of a water tank filled with green-lipped mussels, indigenous to New Zealand and one of the largest species in the world. I picked up three for NZD5/₹230 (again, my

husband refused to eat them). That evening, we placed the mussels on the grill next to a couple of beef steaks and some home-made halloumi and red pepper skewers and watched as the shells slowly open up. I garnished them with some tomato salsa and a squeeze of fresh lemon; the green-tipped mussels were meatier than the commonly available black-shell variety.

After a couple more days, we travelled inland alongside the Southern Alps to Lake Tekapo. Just past the village of Twizel, we stopped for lunch at **High Country Salmon**, a salmon farm and floating café on the glacial waters of Wairepo Arm. This area of New Zealand has a high population of Chinese and Japanese immigrants and tourists, a demographic detail noticeable on the café’s menu. We ordered four salmon-based dishes—poke, sashimi, sushi and chowder—at the canteen counter, and took the plastic trays of sashimi and sushi back to our table. I found the chowder a little too sweet for my taste, but the other dishes were light and fresh. The salmon sushi was perfectly complemented by salty soy sauce and spicy green wasabi paste.

Three weeks in, when it was time to depart, we were sorry to leave the South Island. Our culinary adventures didn’t take us to Michelin-starred restaurants, with gleaming cutlery and crisp white tablecloths. Instead we revelled at food trucks, supermarkets, and produce plucked from the ocean. Even our takeaway was delicious: good food doesn’t need to be dressed up in fancy guises. It tastes just as good eaten outdoors off plastic plates or a wrap of paper; accompanied just by soy sauce or a squeeze of lemon.✕

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & VISA

There are no direct flights from India to New Zealand. Flights from Mumbai and Delhi to Christchurch usually involve one or more layovers in Singapore or Melbourne.

Self drive is very popular in New Zealand. There are rental car depots in the main cities and most regional airports. Your travel insurance must cover car hire. Visitors need a current driver’s licence from their home country or an International Driving Permit (IDP). Like India, NZ drives on the left-hand side of the road.

Applications for a tourist visa to NZ can be made online at www.immigration.govt.nz. It costs NZD210/₹9,750 and takes 3-4 weeks to process.

SEASONS

New Zealand’s climate is usually mild, but can change unexpectedly. It ranges from subtropical in the north to temperate in the south. Inland alpine areas of the South Island can be as cold as -10°C in winter. Spring (Sep-Nov) sees an average temperature of 11°C, summer (Dec-Feb) around 26°C. Autumn/fall (Mar-May) temperatures hovering around 15°C. Check the weather before planning your travel to national parks.



Facing page: Takaka likes its dreadlocked hippies, trippy murals (top) and wholefood cafés; The tapas tasting platter(bottom) at Curator’s House comes with meaty options.

Rome's gelatos come in all colours and flavours, and it is difficult to tell the artisanal apart from the artificial. Eating Europe's Taste of Testaccio food walk is a great way to identify and enjoy gelatos made with fresh ingredients.

THE EUROPE WOLF DOWN

PARISIAN CROQUE-MONSIEURS,
SOUSED HERRING IN AMSTERDAM, OR
A ROARING IRISH GIN—FOOD TOURS
ACROSS EUROPE TO GUIDE YOU
THROUGH A STORM OF FLAVOURS

BY PRACHI JOSHI

Taking a guided tour to eat like a local could seem like quite the contradiction. But if you get past the word 'tour,' it makes perfect sense. Veteran travellers have always relied on locals to help them uncover delicacies, tucked in lanes they would otherwise pass by. There's nothing like a sinfully delicious Dutch *chocoladehagel* for breakfast, or a warm square of *sfincione* munched sitting beside a Sicilian nonna; the only trouble is finding the real deal. So if Europe is on your summer itinerary this year, sign up for these food tours to make every meal more memorable than the last.



PAST PARIS, RELISH ROME

Paris proffers plenty to polish off, from crusty, Grand Prix-competing baguettes to magical mini-barrels of pain au chocolat. Now throw some couscous into the mix.

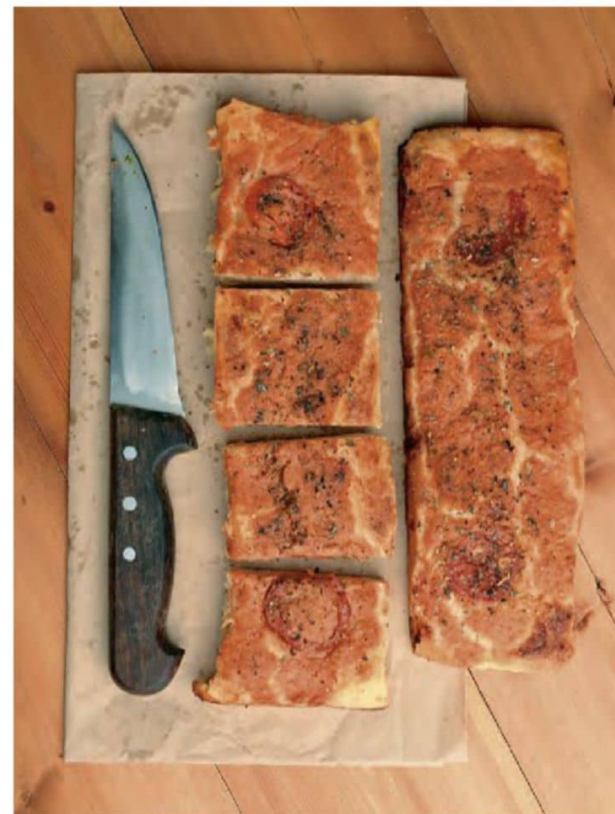
The North African import is one of the top three most-eaten dishes in the French capital. Such precious food bytes are a given when you embark on Eating Europe's newest food tour, Hip Eats & Backstreets. For €95/₹7,500, it's a culinary exploration of Paris's up-and-coming 10th arrondissement. Led by a local, it starts with a wander down Canal Saint-Martin, most famously featured in the French romcom, *Amélie*.

Sightseeing in Paris, you've probably already wolfed down a croque-monsieur, the ham-and-cheese sandwich that originated in the city in the early 20th century and even found its way into Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. But on the tour, you sample its bobo version; multigrain bread stuffed with goat's cheese, roasted dry fruits, forest honey, chives, shallots and rosemary, all floating in the cheesy, creamy

goodness of béchamel-mornay sauce. It's every bit as delicious as it sounds (vegetarians, rejoice!). You'll also pop in and out of a *fromagerie*, for what's a Parisian food tour without hitting a cheese bar. And there's a masterclass in the mindboggling variety of French cheeses in an underground, refurbished 17th-century coal cellar.

The precinct's history is just as flavourful. Traditionally a working-class neighbourhood, it was a magnet for immigrants, especially those from Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria. Many of them arrived in the 1950s as the French colonial rule ended in their countries, bringing with them their distinctive cuisines. It's only befitting then to dine at a traditional Algerian restaurant and do justice to the warm bowl of fluffy couscous accompanied by cooked chickpeas, a richly flavoured vegetable stew, and lamb sausage. At the end of four fruitful hours, the perfect Parisian closure awaits—a scrumptious pastry at a patisserie in the city's bohemian quarter of Haut Marais.

Eating Europe's also got you covered in neighbouring Rome,



Cacio e pepe (top left) is a simple pasta served in Rome, flavoured with black pepper and pecorino romano cheese. A walk in Mercato Testaccio allows you to sample slices of creamy mozzarella di bufala at Enzo & Lina's stall (facing page), or pack a panini (top right); In Copenhagen, *smørrebrød*, the open-face sandwich topped with roasted pork or smoked salmon is king (bottom right); Sicily's version of pizza is the *sfincione*, slices of focaccia-like bread topped with tomatoes, onions, cheese, and herbs (bottom left).

PHOTO COURTESY: EATING EUROPE (PREVIOUS SPREAD & CHEESE SHOP)

EDDY BUTTARELLI/CORBISIMAGES/INODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (PASTA); NICOLE KWATKOWSKI/SHUTTERSTOCK (MAN); LAURO55/SHUTTERSTOCK (BREAD); PHOTO COURTESY: MAD OG STEINING (OPEN-FACE SANDWICH)

Belfast's highlight is 'fifteens,' a Northern Ireland sweet made with 15 crumbled digestive biscuits, 15 marshmallows, and 15 glacé cherries, all mixed with condensed milk and coconut

where it's shockingly easy to land a bad meal, especially in the restaurants flanking the Colosseum. The company's Taste of Testaccio tour winds through Testaccio, or what was traditionally the city's slaughterhouse and where *cucina Romana* (Roman cuisine) was birthed. The tour's highlight? A walk through Mercato Testaccio, a community market heaving with fresh, seasonal produce, bread, poultry, meat, and fish. Bruschetta slathered with fresh tomato, creamy mozzarella, and plenty other small bites are offered as you amble in the grand, glass-roofed market, which, in true Roman fashion, shelters an archaeological site showcasing 2,000-year-old pots and amphorae.

Outside the market, you'll stop at a salumeria to try cheese, cured meats, and balsamic vinegar (aged five to 50 years), and at a pasticceria for some luscious tiramisu. There's also a sit-down meal featuring the very Roman *cacio e pepe* (pasta swimming in pecorino Romano and pepper). The finale? A delightful dispatch in identifying real gelato at a charming, old-time gelateria. Too bright, too peaky, too fluffy? Ditch it. If it's piled high in the container, "Definitely avoid," your guide will weigh in. "That's all artificial stabilisers." You nod, gorging on a cent percent traditional gelato. (*eatingeurope.com*; *Eating Europe also offers tours in London, Florence, Amsterdam, and Lisbon, starting from €65/₹5,100 per person.*)

AMSTERDAM ABSOLUTES

Ask for a *kopstootje* in Amsterdam and you will get a respectful look along with a pint of beer and a shot glass brimming with *jenever* or Dutch gin. Down the shot and follow it up with the beer (and try to stand still). Better yet, take a food tour with Hungry Birds where your guide will ensure that your stomach



is appropriately lined before attempting *kopstootje* (headbutt, in English). The tour starts in central Amsterdam with a traditional Dutch breakfast comprising gingerbread, home-made jams, eggs, and the delicious *chocoladehagel* (buttered bread topped with chocolate sprinkles). No visit to the city is complete without trying the Dutch culinary icon, soused herring, and the tour, called Sunday Experience, is mindful of that. The Dutch began fishing and trading in herring more than a thousand years ago and much of Holland's wealth and sea trade dominance rests on this silvery-blue fish. Kiosks all over the city serve the herring deboned and brined, along with chopped onions and sliced gherkin; hold it by the tail, throw your head back and eat it the 'Dutch way'.

Another popular street food you will tuck into is the *broodje* croquette at an *eetsalon* or lunchroom in the city centre; the *broodje* is essentially beef croquette in a bread roll, with a dash of mustard. Then there are Belgian fries with sauces that range from the regular mayo, garlic, and mustard to inventive ones like sambal, pickle, and satay. The tour also takes you to Jordaan, where you can savour a massive slice of warm apple pie served with a dollop of cream. But the real stud is the *stroopwafel* at Albert Cuypmarkt. There's little else that can compete with the high of biting into two crisp, wafer-thin layers of baked dough that break open to reveal golden caramel syrup. (*hungrybirds.nl*; *tours from €79/₹6,200 per person.*)

BREAKFAST IN BELFAST

Built in the late 1800s, St George's Market is the last remaining Victorian-era covered market in Belfast, located on a site that has hosted a weekly market since 1604. Today, it houses about 300 food stalls and traders. Taste & Tour's food walk quite aptly begins from here, a four-hour jaunt that covers the local food scene from the historic red-brick market to the cobbled streets of Cathedral Quarter and beyond. The day typically starts with a cuppa or a steaming cup of coffee at Ireland's oldest coffee roaster, paired with treacle bread and the very Irish spelt and black pudding potato bread. But the highlight is 'fifteens,' a Northern Ireland sweet treat so named because it contains 15 of every ingredient—15 crumbled digestive biscuits, 15 marshmallows, and 15 glacé cherries, all mixed with condensed milk and desiccated coconut, which is then refrigerated for several hours and cut into 15 slices.

No Irish food tour is complete without alcohol, so there is a stop at The Garrick, a local pub for beer, cider, and champ (creamy mashed potato laced with chopped spring onions), as well as a quick round in a gin bar to sample the Belfast-made Jawbox gin. Instead of tonic, the gin here is served with ginger ale, which incidentally was invented in the mid-1800s in Belfast by Thomas Joseph Cantrell, an Irish apothecary and surgeon. (*tasteandtour.co.uk*; *tours from £58/₹5,200 per person.*)

PHOTO COURTESY: ZOSIA KONIECZNA/HUNGRY BIRDS



When in Paris, grab a croque-monsieur (top) by Canal Saint-Martin; *Broodje kroket* or meat croquette is a popular street snack in Amsterdam, served in tiny *eetsalon* or lunchrooms (facing page). A food truck named Original Stroopwafels at the city's Albert Cuypmarkt serves freshly made *stroopwafels* (bottom) with caramel syrup.

DANISH DELIGHT

A four-hour Culinary Experience tour with Copenhagen Food Tours allows you to deep-dive into the city's burgeoning food scene. The tour begins at Torvehallerne, the city's favourite food hall, where you can sample artisanal foods from small producers across the country. There's cheese, honey, liquorice, caramels and much more. The next stop is at a gourmet restaurant where the Danish staple *smørrebrød* (an open rye bread sandwich topped with cold cuts, cheese, pickled vegetables, and meat) is elevated to a posh bite. Later visits include one to a microbrewery in the hipster-favourite Nørrebro neighbourhood. (*copenhagen.foodtours.eu*; *tours start from DKK850/₹9,000 per person.*)

A SLICE OF SICILY

Locals in Palermo will proudly tell you that they are Sicilians, not Italians. And their food certainly is not what you'd immediately identify as Italian. One of the best ways to savour Sicilian cuisine is Streaty's street food tour that snakes through the cobblestoned markets of Capo, Ballarò, and Vucciria. Sicily's nose-to-tail eating approach becomes evident instantaneously. Sample this: there is *frittola*, a mixture of veal off-cuts boiled and fried in lard; and *pani ca meusa*, a sandwich with cow spleen, lung, and throat cartilage, again, all

boiled and fried in pork lard, along with a generous sprinkling of *caciocavallo* cheese. This is a typical Sicilian stretched-curd cheese made of sheep's or cow's milk.

Vegetarians, there's hope in the Sicilian pizza: *sfincione* (pronounced sfin-chee-o-nay), which comes topped with tomatoes, onions, herbs, *caciocavallo*, as well as *panelle* (chickpea flour fritters). The chickpea is a legacy of the Arab influence on the local cuisine that came about with the 10th-century Moorish conquest of Sicily. In fact, as you venture into Palermo's markets, you will notice that they seem less European and more Levantine. Your guide will tell you how the Arabs also gave Sicily its favourite street snack, *arancina*—deep-fried rice balls often stuffed with veal, onion, peas, and carrot.

The tour also takes you to a local tavern for some *Sangue Siciliano*, a cloyingly sweet, blood red dessert wine, aptly translated as Sicilian blood. The three-hour walk through the crammed alleys in the city of *The Godfather* ends in a

pasticceria for a taste of *cannolo* (plural cannoli), pastry shells filled with sweetened, creamy ricotta. Pro tip: A "proper" cannolo is one where the ricotta filling is piped into the pastry shell in front of you (not pre-filled), and lightly dusted with powdered sugar.

It really is an offer you can't refuse. (*streaty.com*; *besides Palermo, Streaty offers tours in Catania, Florence, and Venice too; from €39/₹3,000 per person.*) ✂



The mahogany interiors of Musso & Frank Grill are portals to an older world. Best known for its steak and chops, it starred in *Ocean's Eleven*, in the scene where George Clooney and Brad Pitt plan their heist.

Los Angeles on my Plate

Starring classic American favourites and recipes from kitchens around the world

BY MALAVIKA
BHATTACHARYA

The city of angels brims with celebrity-studded restaurants where the stars and the starry-eyed eat. But peel away the layers and Los Angeles reveals a history of iconic institutions—both classic American diners and food that celebrates the life of its migrant communities. Korean barbecues, vegan cafés, and Japanese sushi places abound, as do more modest joints where age-old recipes rule hearts. Here's where Tinseltown loves to tuck in:

Old-School Institution

Among the oldest surviving institutions on Hollywood Boulevard, 100-year-old Musso & Frank Grill is older than the Hollywood sign. Stepping into its dimly lit interiors with a mahogany bar and booths with red-leather seats is like walking in to a *Mad Men* set. Little wonder that Musso's did actually make an appearance on the cult TV show. As the liveried maitre d' leads me to my table, he reels off a list of who's who that were once regulars here. "That's Charlie Chaplin's booth by the window. He'd sit there so he could watch his horse. Hemingway and Fitzgerald spent hours in here," he says. When I ask for menu recommendations, he points to the classics and tells me, "The Rolling Stones

always came in for the liver and onions."

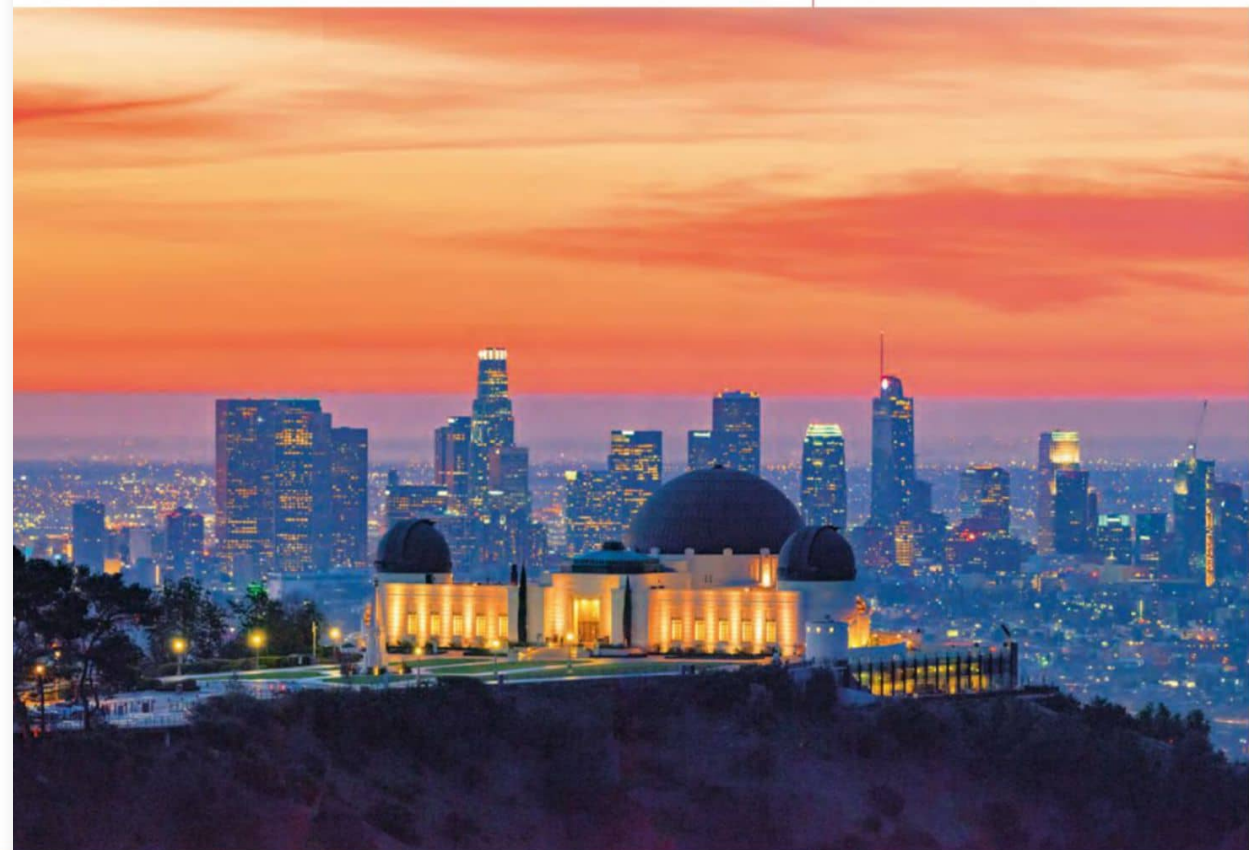
I'm seated at Frank Sinatra's favourite booth, and handed the opposite of a James Bond-style martini—stirred, not shaken—one of Musso's best-known offerings, before tucking into a gigantic pork chop. Well-loved for its steak and chops, the restaurant also serves oyster stew and veal schnitzel (thin slices of veal dipped in egg, coated in flour and fried gold). It has a way of taking you back in time; maybe it is the classic interiors retained from its early days, or the original charcoal grill from 1919. Or maybe it's the fact that there have been only three executive chefs in the restaurant's 100-year history.

Cultural Hotpot

In the slick business district of Downtown, 102-year-old Grand Central Market brings together food and memories from streets around the world. Early one morning, I walk past the bright red umbrellas on the sidewalk, into the covered food market that recently made an appearance in the film, *La La Land*. Inside, bright neon signs advertise everything from Mexican roasts, Filipino *sisig*, and Japanese bento to freshly roasted coffee, deli food and a brewery.

The market sits across the Angels Flight funicular railway, which runs to the top of Bunker Hill. Back in 1917 when the market first opened, affluent residents of Victorian mansions on the hill would ride the railway down to shop for essentials

EDDIEHERNANDEZPHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK



Griffith Observatory, which featured in the film *La La Land*, offers dreamy views of the Hollywood sign and skyline. When you've had your fill of the sight, head to In-N-Out (bottom) for their "secret menu" which offers burgers with three or four patties.

Grand Central Market is the liveliest during lunch hour, when people step out of Downtown's swank offices and grab seats at the market's communal tables for a melange of cuisines from around the world.



4KODIAK/E+/GETTY IMAGES (CITY); SHENGYING LIN/SHUTTERSTOCK (FOOD)



like eggs and dairy. Since then, the bazaar has evolved into a culinary hotpot hawking American favourites and classics brought in by LA's migrant communities.

I grab a fresh brew from G&B Coffee and join the snaking queue at EggsIut for a burger. The stall's much-Instagrammed sandwich is worth the hype, with gooey cheddar oozing out of a hot brioche stuffed with smoky bacon and a melting egg. While curious crowds flock to the hip eatery in the morning, afternoons typically see long-term loyalists head to the market's legacy vendors, who have been here for more than 30 years. Latino grocers, Chiles Secos, is one such establishment. Craving Chinese? Wolf down wonton soup or chow mein from China Cafe. For creamy cheese slices made locally and abroad, head to DTLA Cheese and Kitchen. In Grand Central, you're never too far from great flavours.

Celebrity Haunt

At the achingly hip Dream Hotel's Highlight Room restaurant, everybody—other diners and wait staff—looks like they've stepped out of magazine covers and onto the poolside rooftop restaurant. Leonardo DiCaprio had his birthday party here once. Hollywood hopefuls frequent this spot dreaming to be spotted. My eyes, however, are drawn to the chessboard-tiled floors, sweeping views of Hollywood's skyline and then to the hipster selection of foods on the table. Of course, there's avocado toast—the creation that's captured California's culinary conscience—along with açai and poke bowls



Eggslut in Grand Central Market gives a delicious gourmet twist to eggs, serving warm brichoe buns with ground angus beef, chives, and seared wagyu steaks.

accompanied by sweet potato fries and taro chips. I like to imagine Beyoncé and Jay-Z dined similarly when they threw a grand birthday bash at the hotel's nightclub, Beauty & Essex.

City Icon

Outdoors in the California sunshine with a view of spindly palm trees, I bite into a delicious, artery-choking cheeseburger at LA's reigning fast-food diner, In-N-Out. With this meal, I've stepped right into the American pop culture TV shows of my teenage years, where high-school students would hang out over burgers and shakes after school. In-N-Out is an institution Angelenos swear by for its fresh produce and fuss-free menu consisting of just three quintessentially American items: burgers, fries, and shakes.

A long queue extends outside the diner door at its Hollywood branch, but service is swift. In-the-know locals order from a "secret menu" which features mustard-grilled burger patties and Animal Style fries, which are a glorious, messy bowl of hot fries doused in cheese, sauces, pickles, and grilled onions.

Revival Road

The Arts District, with its mural-splattered buildings, art galleries, and trendy eateries is the epitome of LA cool. But what we see today is a gentrified version of a former industrial district. Warehouses and factories defined the locality in the

late 19th century but gradually fell into disrepair by the mid-1900s. In the 1970s, artists cashed in on low rents and moved into these abandoned buildings, leading to a boom in creative ventures in unlikely quarters. Today, coffee roasters and craft breweries stand shoulder to shoulder with galleries and design studios. I step into popular ice-cream shop Salt & Straw to sample some of the most innovative flavours I could have never imagined. I taste a piquant goat cheese with black olive ice cream, a creamy olive oil flavour, and a tangy pear with blue cheese. The coffee and bourbon scoop I settle for turns to be rather tame, but I'm not complaining. The creative pairings truly embody the spirit of the district.✂

ESSENTIALS

There are no direct flights between India and Los Angeles. Flights from Mumbai and Delhi have at least one layover at Chinese gateway cities like Beijing and Shanghai, or a Middle-Eastern city like Abu Dhabi. The LAX FlyAway buses regularly ply between the airport to various locations in the city. The Metro bus and rail connect several parts of the city, and cabs are an equally popular way to get around.

PHOTO COURTESY: EGGS LUT

THE JOURNEY

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FROZEN AT THE WORLD'S END

Going to the market is a helluva adventure when it is in Jokkmokk, a Swedish town with indigenous art and reindeer races



JOUKO ESKELINEN/500PX UNRELEASED/GETTY IMAGES

The Jokkmokk Vintermarknad or winter market, held on the first weekend of February since 1605, displays handicrafts typical to the indigenous Sámi people.

FROZEN AT THE WORLD'S END

Going to the market is a helluva adventure when it is in Jokkmokk, a snow-laden Swedish town with indigenous art and reindeer races **By Vaishali Dinakaran**





I'M SHUFFLING
ALONG AS BEST
AS I CAN. THE
COLD STINGS
MY FACE. MY EYES
BEGIN TO WATER.
A TEARDROP FALLS
ONTO MY GLASSES
AND FREEZES IN
SECONDS.

The short walk from the car park to the town centre has made me miserable. It's -25 °C in Jokkmokk, Sweden, just above the Arctic Circle. Sub-zero weather, even with a sturdy pair of winter boots, a very warm parka, and two pairs of gloves, is enough to get the better of the best. I contemplate ducking into the first shop I find, temporarily abandoning the hunt for my friends, when I hear familiar voices behind me. I turn around to find Marc and Katrin, looking surprisingly cheerful, given the polar weather. They're troopers all right, I think to myself, as I follow them into a coffee shop.

A MARKET TO REMEMBER

We've made the trip up to Norrbotten County of the Swedish Lapland to visit the famous Jokkmokk Vintermarknad or winter market, which has been held on the first weekend of February every single year since 1605. The market—an annual gathering held at the centre of the 3.6 square kilometre town—is a celebration of the cultural heritage of the Sámi. The Sámi people are indigenous to Sápmi or the Lapland area, which includes parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. Like previous editions of the event, the 414th market we're at sees the otherwise sleepy town of 3,000 odd people come alive, attracting as many as 50,000 visitors from all over the world. The town's two hotels and one hostel are fully booked months

At around -25 °C, animal-skin coats (left) keep Jokkmokk dwellers warm, in addition to tents (right) selling food and drink, with a crackling fire to huddle around.

V. BELOV/SHUTTERSTOCK (MAN); PHOTO COURTESY: ANNA ÖHLUND/IMAGEBANK.SWEDEN.SE (TENT)
PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHOTO COURTESY: ASAF KLUGER/IMAGEBANK.SWEDEN.SE

in advance. Which is why people camp in neighbouring towns like Arvidsjaur, some 153 kilometres away. Busloads of tourists are delivered to the market each morning and hauled away each evening. By the end of the day, they'd have partaken in, amongst other things, snowmobile tours and husky-sled rides. The lucky ones who manage to find overnight accommodation might even catch a glimpse of the aurora borealis.

SHIVERS WITH A SIDE OF HISTORY

At Café Gaskass, where we have taken refuge, we strategise, and fill up on coffee and local pastries, hoping that the sugar will keep us going. The proprietress seems sympathetic as she watches us place our gloves and caps on the radiator. "You should layer animal skin closest to your skin," she tells us. "It keeps the warmth in."

In the early days, the market was a place for the Sámi people to meet, interact and trade goods. However, in 1606, King Karl IX of Sweden, who had annexed the (Swedish) Lapland into his own territory, saw the market as a fine economic opportunity. He sent his envoys to keep an eye on the goods being traded, which allowed him to extract a heavier tax from the Sámi people, and enabled him to bolster royal coffers. King Karl also employed a priest who would scold, punish, or absolve 'sinners'—neither the court nor the church took kindly to the shamanistic practices of the Sámi.

CRAFT AND CANDY CANES

Four decades later, the market that we witness is a testament

to the resilience of the Sámi. Not only because they never let the cold climes get the better of them, but also because they've overcome a long history of marginalisation. What had once been the means to financially exploit them, has now evolved into an event that pays homage to what it means to be Sámi and plays a vital role in Jokkmokk's economy. The brightly coloured *kolt* or *gákti* (the sartorial equivalent of a biodata, the embroidery often denoting the wearer's hometown, age, or marital status), and the *lukkha*, a traditional poncho, is worn with pride. The bright colours are a stark contrast to the endless white around. Locals who aren't wearing this are clad from head to toe in reindeer fur—hats, long coats, and pointy-toed reindeer skin boots, all of which we find on sale at the market. But these aren't the only signs of the reindeer in Jokkmokk. The reindeer is everywhere!

Traditionally, the Sámi were nomadic reindeer herders, and even today their lives are inextricably linked with the animals. We walk down the main market street lined with stalls that sell reindeer meat in every form possible form. There's vacuum-packed, dried, and smoked reindeer; reindeer sausage, reindeer salami, reindeer liver, reindeer tongue, and even packaged reindeer blood. The last one is used to make reindeer blood pancakes, and *blodpalt* or blood dumplings.

Swedish candy stalls (left) add a pop of colour to the snow in Jokkmokk, which is 1,300 kilometres north of Gränna, where the candy cane was invented. Jokkmokk is also famous for reindeer (right) and elk meat products.

KUZNETSOVA JULIA/SHUTTERSTOCK (MARKET)
PHOTO COURTESY: FERNILLA AHLSEN/IMAGEBANK.SWEDEN.SE (REINDEER MEAT)

NOT ALL MAKE IT TO THE FINISH LINE. WE SEE RIDERS FLYING RIGHT OFF THEIR SLEIGHS, WHILE THE REINDEER CONTINUE TO RACE

Also on display are reindeer skin rugs, reindeer antler artefacts, reindeer paintings, posters and photographs for sale. The market has other stalls as well, selling *tunnbröd* (Swedish flatbread), a plethora of Swedish candy, grilled sausages in bread, and curiously enough, T-shirts with the logos of rock bands on them.

We've only walked through a small portion of the market, but the cold has already crept all the way into our bones. Luckily, we chance upon the *Samernas Utbildningscentrum* or the Sami Education Centre, which runs various skill-based courses for Sámi people, including traditional Sámi art and craft. Here we are introduced to *duodji*, a Sámi handicraft where the functional and artistic coincide. From the *kåsa* (a drinking cup carved out of birch burl), to the *komse* (a cradle made of a hollowed-out tree trunk, covered in reindeer skin), to leather purses, coffee bags, knives, and pewter jewellery, it's a treasure trove. There are also plays, musical shows, dances and talks that shine light on Sámi history and culture.

FASHION FREEZE

Later, we manage to catch an indigenous fashion show on a 'snow stage', bright blue kolts and striking modern renditions

of Sámi garments breaking up the cold whites. We also spot a reindeer caravan, led by local reindeer herder and festival favourite Per Kuhmunen and his family; visit the Attjes Museum, the gift shop, the Sámi Duodji art centre and the tourist centre. Our ambling is only interrupted by a quick pause for lunch at the cafeteria in the Education Centre. The dry Swedish air has left me completely dehydrated, and all I can manage is a bottle of water. But in the days leading up to the market, I've already consumed a lot of gamey reindeer meat, and the slightly subtler elk, so I don't feel too bad. Marc tucks into a piping hot plateful of elk stew, complete with elk blood dumplings swimming in it. It's a simple but rich dish, and as he later says, "The sort of meal I imagine the locals need to make it through the day."

RUN RUDOLPH, RUN

By the time we walk to the middle of a frozen Lake Talvatis, Reindeer races attract a big crowd, who stand on a frozen Lake Talvatis to watch intrepid racers hang on to their sleighs. Facing page: Dog sledding (top) is a great way to absorb the drama of flatlands and snow-white forests in Lapland; Jokkmokk is the ideal setting for the psychedelia of the Aurora Borealis (bottom).

PHOTO COURTESY: ASAF KLIGER/IMAGEBANK.SWEDEN.SE

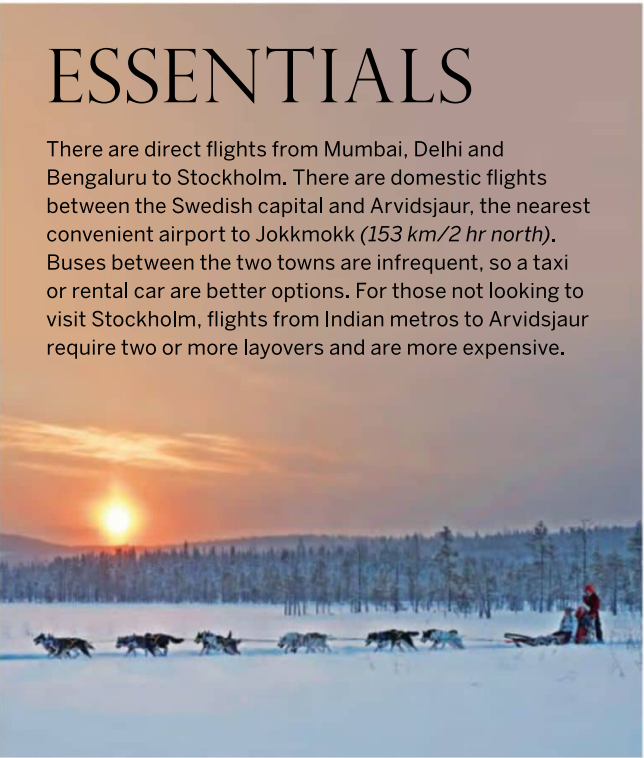
five minutes from the market, a crowd's already gathered for the big show. It's time for the reindeer races. We find ourselves craning our necks, jostling for space with an enthusiastic audience. The races involve two competitors at a time. The reindeer stand side by side, each fastened to a sleigh. Then a person climbs aboard the sleigh and lies face down on it. On signal, the reindeer go galloping down the course, the intrepid rider hanging on for dear life. Not all make it to the finish line. We see a few riders flying right off their sleighs, while the reindeer continue to race. Other reindeer slow down and come to a halt midway. A stubborn one even plonks down at the start line and refuses to move. Nonetheless, everyone is cheered on loudly.

The sun sets early this time of the year, so we decide to leave soon after the races. I have a two-hour drive on icy roads to get back to my hotel in Arvidsjaur. As I leave the market area and drive onto the main street leading out of Jokkmokk, the town suddenly looks ordinary. Pretty and frosted exquisitely with snow, no doubt, but bearing almost no sign of the festival that's taking place just a few hundred yards away. It's the same feeling I get when I pull off the arrow-straight highway, to stop at the Arctic Circle landmark seven kilometres south of Jokkmokk. The sense that in the midst of something seemingly ordinary and mundane, something so surprising and extraordinary can lie tucked away. Like a whole incredible culture that flourishes all the way at the world's end, and the people who are determined to keep it that way.✂

PHOTO COURTESY: ANNA ÖHLUND/IMAGEBANK.SWEDEN.SE (DOGSLEDDING), BJÖRN OLIN/FOLIO/GETTY IMAGES (LANDSCAPE)

ESSENTIALS

There are direct flights from Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru to Stockholm. There are domestic flights between the Swedish capital and Arvidsjaur, the nearest convenient airport to Jokkmokk (153 km/2 hr north). Buses between the two towns are infrequent, so a taxi or rental car are better options. For those not looking to visit Stockholm, flights from Indian metros to Arvidsjaur require two or more layovers and are more expensive.



HEART OF THE ANDES

ECUADOR

Frozen summits and the fiery spirit of a 19th-century
adventurer inspire a trek to Ecuador's epic volcanoes

BY CHARLES RUNNETTE

With Ecuador's capital, Quito, in mist below, a climber stands atop a peak of 15,730-foot Pichincha. In the distance, snowy Cayambe is also part of the Andean cordillera that Alexander von Humboldt called the Avenue of the Volcanoes.

I am wide awake at 2.14 a.m., breathless, anxious, parched in a place of nightmares: the musky bottom bunk of a single-room *refugio* (mountaintop hut), 15,420 feet up Ecuador's Iliniza Sur volcano. A howling blizzard swirls outside, but somehow 15 other climbers, our local guides, and a couple of stranded refugio staffers snore away on flophouse-style mattresses all around me. Feeling desperate and a little crazed, I contemplate getting up, thinking it may ease my panic, but I quickly realise that would mean tiptoeing over sleeping bodies, boots, and poles, opening the hut to the storm, and pacing close to where the mules sound as if they're freezing to death. I decide to skip it and focus on powering down my body while dreaming of my bed at home.

Friends warned against my plan to climb, in less than a week, a handful of Ecuadorian volcanoes in the boot-steps of my hero, Prussian adventurer, naturalist, and bon vivant Alexander von Humboldt. But I ignored them all in favour of the allure of names like Pichincha, Cayambe, Cotopaxi, Iliniza. I ignored them in my own pursuit of Humboldt. Instead of listening to them, I listened to my ego. Look where that got me. It's now 2.16 a.m.

ECUADOR COULD BE A STAND-IN FOR EDEN. Slightly larger than Colorado, this compact country holds more species of most groups of organisms than all of the United States and Canada combined, and supports a multitude of different microclimates. Ecuador is the smallest of the 17 nations that made Conservation International's megadiversity list and is home to some 1,600 different birds—just shy of all of those in North America and Europe combined—along with 435 species of mammals, 500 species of amphibians, and more than 15,000 species of vascular plants.

In the early 19th century, before Charles Darwin thrust the Galápagos into the world wonder club, Humboldt installed Ecuador on the bucket list with his best-selling books (*Cosmos*, *Views of the Cordilleras*). He conjured images of equatorial jungles teeming with jaguars, electric eels, and rare epiphytes, and told tales of high-altitude valleys banded by mesmeric, active Andean volcanoes—then thought to be the highest mountains on Earth. Humboldt saw both beauty and threat in this realm where, as he said, “everything is interaction and reciprocal.”

Most of Humboldt's observations are still supported by modern science. Glaciologists and mountain guides alike have used the detailed measurements from his renowned

Naturgemälde (a cross-section infographic he created of Chimborazo, the tallest mountain in Ecuador) to gauge changes in glacier mass. The findings are not encouraging. The glaciers of Ecuador's Andes, which provide some of the water supply for the farmers of the area as well as for the nearby capital, Quito, are receding and, in some cases, disappearing altogether. In the past decade, glaciers along Ecuador's cordilleras—Cotacachi, Corazón, and Sincholagua—have vanished, and the glacier atop Cayambe will be gone in the next 20 years.

My Humboldt-inspired quest started out with plenty of promise and crisp Andean weather. In Quito I met up with mountain guide Oswaldo Friere. We took a 20-minute TelefériQo gondola ride up 2,720 feet, from the edge of the city to the base of Pichincha. Friere regaled me with stories of climbing Everest without oxygen.

I told him about my long-held admiration for Humboldt—recently reignited with the 2015 publication of Andrea Wulf's compelling Humboldt biography, *The Invention of Nature*. This had motivated me to summit the lower peak (at 15,415 feet) of Pichincha, Quito's backyard active stratovolcano, on my first day in town. A little short of breath and my head throbbing a bit, I had advanced along the grassy, gradual

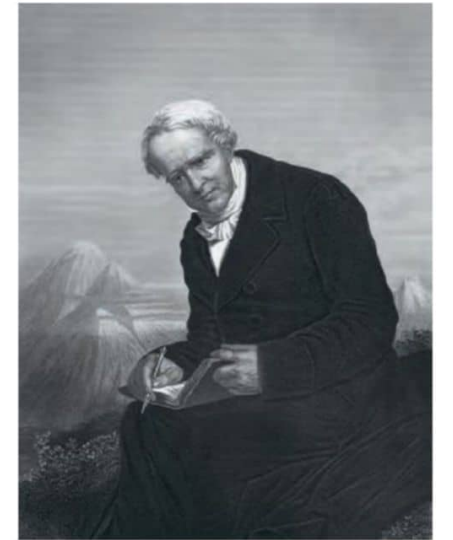
incline toward the peak, motivated by the apparition of a falcon-like caracara. “Altitude sickness is like any illness; if exposed frequently enough, your body can get used to it,” Friere told me, looking me over for any signs of trouble. He added, “But if your body senses it's in danger, it will try anything it can to force you to head back down.”

Having proved myself on Pichincha, I travelled with Friere beyond Quito, driving across lush vales, under azure sky and milky white altocumulus clouds, toward the dramatic cordilleras that Humboldt called the Avenue of the Volcanoes. Our destination: Cayambe, Ecuador's third highest peak.

Along for the ride (and the climb): Friere's 13-year-old daughter, Nikita, who was part mountain goat. She demanded that I explain my Humboldt fascination. “What makes him so great?” she asked.

“Father of the modern ecology movement” sounded dull. “A man with many places, plants, and even part of the moon named after him” gave short shrift. I decided to sell her on Humboldt's impact—the fact that his writings and drawings, particularly on this extraordinary corner of the New World, inspired game-changing accomplishments by scientists, poets, revolutionaries, and artists. Then I rattled off some big names I thought might impress her: Charles Darwin, Walt Whitman,

PETE OXFORD (ALPACA); BEQUEST OF MARGARET E. DOWS, 1909 (LANDSCAPE); FALKENSTEIN/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (PORTRAIT)
PREVIOUS SPREAD: MAC STONE/TANDEM STOCK (CLIMBER)



After a trip to Ecuador in the footsteps of the renowned naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (right), American artist Frederic Edwin Church painted “Heart of the Andes,” (middle) which caused a sensation when it debuted in New York in 1859. Crowds lined up daily to view this 10-foot-wide masterpiece. It now resides at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Alpacas (left) are among the well-adapted animals that roam Antisana Ecological Reserve, in the chilly central highlands.

THE JOURNEY

Climbers make their way up 19,350-foot Cotopaxi, one of Ecuador's most active volcanoes.



According to Hacienda La Ciénega's (left) history, Humboldt and his team stayed at this historic lodging when he carried out his study of Cotopaxi in 1802. The volcano is reflected in a window at nearby Chilcabamba Mountain Lodge (right). Just 1.5 hours from Quito, the lodge is a popular stay for travellers hiking Cotopaxi.



orchids, flowering philodendrons, shimmering butterflies, a winding river, and snowy glaciers.

After Mark Twain saw Church's piece, he gushed to a friend, "You will never get tired of looking at this picture, but your reflections—your efforts to grasp an intelligible Something—you hardly know what—will grow so painful that you will have to go away from the thing, in order to obtain relief."

Standing at the foot of a Cayambe glacier, I could see what Twain meant. The views are still exhaustingly magnificent.

Simón Bolívar, John Muir, and Frederic Edwin Church.

On my phone I pulled up an image of Church's masterwork, "Heart of the Andes." A New York-based artist, Church painted his 10-foot-wide tour de force after his second South American pilgrimage to view his idol Humboldt's Avenue of the Volcanoes. Nikita took a close look as I told her how, at the painting's 1859 New York unveiling, "Heart of the Andes" became an art world sensation—with more than 12,000 people paying 25 cents each to gaze at it with opera glasses for a few minutes. Crowds in New York (and on the painting's tour in London) lined up to be transported to this South American arcadia that Church depicted grandly with hanging vines, moss, tree ferns, red-breasted crows, passionflowers, budding

BORN TO A WEALTHY aristocratic Berlin family in 1769, Alexander von Humboldt could easily have stayed put in Prussia, as his mother wished, and enjoyed an extremely agreeable life in a modest mansion on the bucolic Tegeler See, spending time with his brother, Wilhelm, and confidant, Goethe. But Alexander's mother died when he was in his 20s, leaving him and his brother a small fortune—Alexander's portion of which he promptly spent on travel. After a few false starts, on June 5, 1799, just shy of his 30th birthday, he set sail on an extraordinary five-year journey to the New World: modern-day Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, and the United States. He longed to see everything worth seeing, learn everything worth knowing, and meet everyone interesting.

ANNE FARRAR (WOMAN & WINDOW)
FACING PAGE: JASON THOMPSON/TANDEM STOCK



Some of the forest's exquisite endemics include the booted racket-tail hummingbird (right) and the Andean daisy (left).



GLENN BARTLEY (BIRD), PETE OXFORD (PLANT)

The tales of what he found along the journey changed the way Europe saw the Americas and the way the world viewed nature. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said of him and his writings, “Humboldt was one of those great wonders of the world, like Aristotle, like Julius Caesar...who appear from time to time, as if to show us the possibilities of the human mind, the force and range of the faculties—a universal man.”

In 1802 Humboldt arrived in Quito overland from Cartagena, a gruelling 2,100-kilometre trip through the jungles of Colombia and the foothills of the Andes. He remained in Quito and the surrounding area for five months, before scaling every mountain in sight with his team: Aimé Bonpland, his French botanist associate; José, his manservant who helped with the scientific measurements; and Carlos Montúfar, a handsome (“Adonis-like,” in many accounts) young Ecuadorian aristocrat he befriended in Quito who went on to become his companion for nearly a decade.

TO SUMMIT CAYAMBE, I joined Nikita and her dad's Mountain Madness glacier school for my first real mountaineering test of the trip. At 19,000 feet, Cayambe has the odd distinction of being the tallest point on the Equator and the only spot at 0° with a year-round snowcap. After hours and hours of slowly ice-axing up the steep glacier

with only a few scary missteps along the way, we stood atop Cayambe's wall of ice and snow, looking across to the other volcanoes, down to the clouds, and even farther down to the tilled land and communities below—the whole system of life in front of us. I suddenly appreciated Humboldt's desire to admire the world from on high. “There is doubtless something solemn and imposing in the aspect of a boundless horizon,” he wrote.

A few days later, near Cotopaxi, the most picturesque of Ecuador's volcanoes, I met up with Jorge Pérez and his anthropologist wife, María José Andrade, who run a tour company and duo of charming haciendas called Tierra del Volcán that promote conservation in the area. They

Wild steeds (left) graze in Cotopaxi National Park near acclimatisation centre Hosteria Tambopaxi; Manuel Changoluisa (right) keeps *chagra* (cowboy) culture alive at his traditional sod house at the base of Cotopaxi.



PETE OXFORD (HORSES), ANNE FARRAR (MAN)

were hosting a group from a National Geographic Student Expedition when I sat down with them in their homey, thatched-roof Hacienda El Porvenir for dinner by the fire.

Started in 1999 as a university project by Quito native Pérez, the company aims to preserve the natural resources of the area by creating lucrative jobs for the locals, as well as a market for the agricultural products and crafts produced by those they don't employ—to help them understand that tourism can be a reason to be good stewards of their stunning patrimony.

“We want everyone who lives in this beautiful place to understand there are great benefits to conservation,” Pérez said to me. “You don't protect what you don't know and won't miss.”



The next day I jumped at the chance to head out on horseback with María José in the grasslands in the shadow of Cotopaxi. Both of us dressed in traditional *chagras* (Ecuadorian cowboy) garb—thick llama chaps and heavy wool ponchos—we chatted away and let our sturdy, powerful horses do the climbing. She told me how the Inca revered the mountains. “These mountains show us how small we are,” said María José, a distant relative of Humboldt's long-time companion, Carlos Montúfar. “They're humbling and enlightening, and they're the reason visitors like Humboldt had a legendary journey here.”

For a few minutes we sat quietly on a hilltop, watching a pair of Andean condors wheel overhead and feeling the connectedness Humboldt described in his writings. On a still clear day like that one, there seemed no place more silent on the planet.

BUT THEN BACK TO THE HOWLING STORM. My passion for the Prussian led me to Iliniza Sur, where I spent the worst night of my life and discovered first-hand what Friere meant about how an unhappy body can turn your brain on you—begging or forcing you to head back down a mountain. I worried about disappointing my guide by telling him I didn't want to attempt to summit, that I just wanted to get off this



Plaza Grande anchors Quito's well-preserved colonial old town, which earned the distinction as the first UNESCO World Heritage-designated capital.

mountain. Instead, he was relieved. A mountain is a force of nature; if I had learned anything on my Humboldt quest, it was not to defy nature. The great explorer himself had never reached the summit of Chimborazo. Humbled by Humboldt, I turned back.

One week later, in Manhattan and missing the volcanoes, I trekked uptown to the Metropolitan Museum of Art where Church's "Heart of the Andes" now lives. Sold to New York manufacturer and Met founder William Blodgett for \$10,000—at the time a record sum for the work of a living American artist—the painting changed hands again in 1876 when Blodgett sold it to socialite Margaret Dows, who bequeathed it to the Met upon her death in 1909. It occupies a wall in a massive room on the second floor of the Met's American Wing.

I could feel its pull from rooms away. The visual manifestation of Humboldt's meandering but brilliant multivolume book of observations about the world, *Cosmos*, the painting shows the same enthusiasm that Humboldt had for uniting and preserving the natural estate. Alone in the gallery, staring at it without opera glasses and a crush of people jostling for a glimpse, I felt transported back to the silence and storminess and wonder of Humboldt's Avenue of the Volcanoes, throwing out its sparks of connection even here, even now. ✂

Essentials

HOW TO GO
U.S.-based outfitter Mountain Madness, which has long-time expertise operating in the country, leads treks to Ecuador's volcanoes. Guides have experience on all of Ecuador's peaks, as well as mountains in the Himalayas, Russia, and the Alps. mountainmadness.co; prices from \$3,375/£2,35,000 not including airfare and insurance.

STAY
Casa Gangotena
Before heading out to the Avenue of the Volcanoes, most travellers spend at least a couple of nights in Quito. Casa Gangotena, in the Old Town, is a 31-room restored mansion with sweeping rooftop views of Quito's colonial centre. casagangotena.com

Hacienda San Agustín de Callo
This Cusco-style Inca palace cum Augustinian monastery now functions as a small hotel with a dreamy view of Cotopaxi. Host and owner Mignon Plaza delights visitors in the Inca-walled dining room with tales of her father, a legendary congressman and bullfighter, and her grandfather, General Leónidas Plaza Gutierrez, the former two-term president of Ecuador. Humboldt may or may not have visited the rooms here, but members of the French geodesic expedition that measured the roundness of the Earth in the 18th century definitely did. incahacienda.com

Mashpi Lodge
Outside Quito, in the opposite direction from the Avenue of the Volcanoes, this National Geographic Unique Lodge

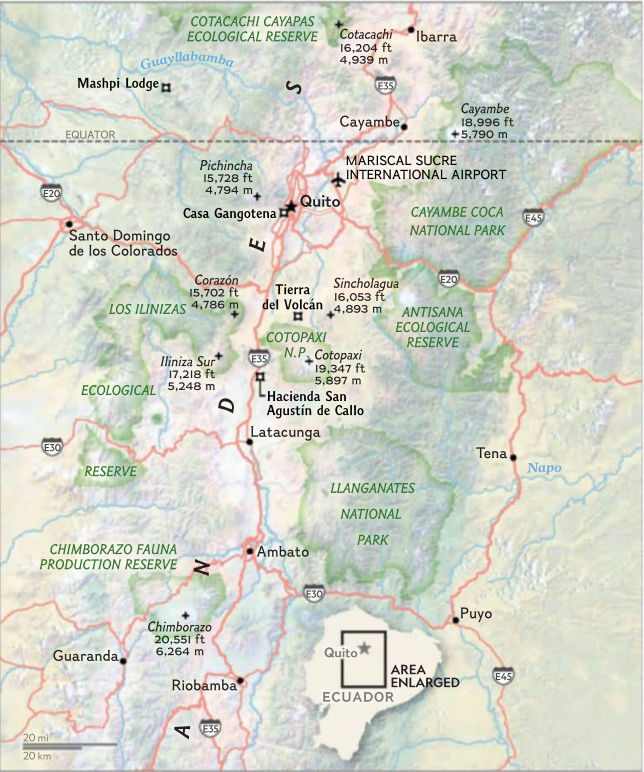
of the World is located in a cloud forest and appeals to anyone who loves rare orchids and amphibians. The open gondola ride through the canopy of the forest is alone worth the three-hour drive from the capital. And don't miss the night-time forest safari to see the most spectacular frogs, some of which (such as the torrent-tailed Mashpi frog) can be found only here. mashpilodge.com

Hacienda El Porvenir
Right at the foot of Cotopaxi, this thatched-roof lodge enchants. The hosts can plan excursions for you in the area, a horseback ride around the most beautiful mountain Frederic Edwin Church ever painted, or a trip to the Avenue of the Volcanoes. tierradelvolcan.com

EAT
Zazu
Gastronomic treats fill the evening's meal at Quito's Zazu, which offers a seven-course tasting menu that highlights Andean grains and native potatoes and cazuela-style (clay pot) cooking. zazuquito.com

Laboratorio
This may be the coolest restaurant in Quito, where a rotating group of local and international chefs show off their talents with fresh and innovative ideas and an ever-changing menu. laboratorio.rest

Bandido Brewing
This creative-class hangout in Quito's La Tola neighbourhood serves up artisanal pizza, local microbrews, and draft kombucha. bandidobrewing.com



Visitors at Mashpi Lodge, one of National Geographic's Unique Lodges of the World, can explore the forest via an overlook, gondola, or even a cabled "sky bike."



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OCEAN'S MOST WILD

WHEN A PHOTOGRAPHER
DIVES INTO OCEANS,
SECRETS OF ELUSIVE
MARINE LIFE
COME DRIFTING

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS
BY **DHRITIMAN MUKHERJEE**



DUGONG

Off the coast of Marsa Alam, a resort town in southeastern Egypt, the Red Sea is a magic vault of marine life. But my 10-day dive expedition in 2016 had one muse—the dugong. The Dugong dugon is a sirenian found in warm and shallow coastal waters from East Africa to Australia, including the Red Sea, Indian Ocean and Pacific. As for me, nine days of skulking underwater at 23 feet had left me high and dry. With depleting oxygen forcing me back to the surface on Day 10, I turned around one last time. And there it was, nibbling at clumps of wispy sea grass, a dugong. Around 10-foot-long, the herbivore went about its business unconcerned by my presence. Sharing space with the vulnerable species without encroaching made for a special encounter.

BASKET STAR

My adventure began on a snowmobile rolling across a frozen White Sea in Russia. In the middle of February, I had travelled to Karelia in the northwest, to see the marine invertebrate, basket star. It had taken me the help of a local co-diver and a good one hour to coax a cavity in the ocean ice, my portal for diving in. Inside, sculpins and sea angels swerved past in silence, bringing me home to a familiar eeriness—and to this lemon-ochre vision. I'll remember the distant relative of sea urchins and starfish for its five-pointed body and gangly arm-like branches, reaching into billowing darkness.





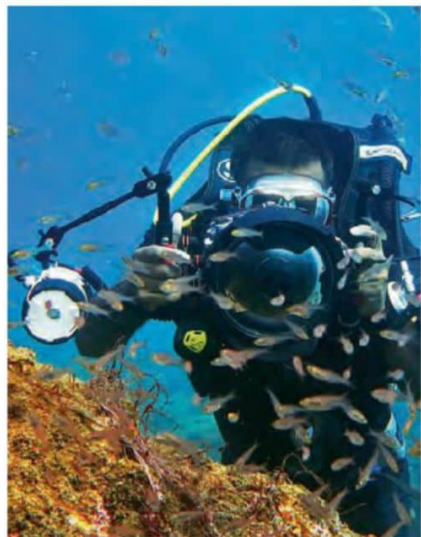
HUMPBACK WHALE

My search for the humpback whale ended in 2014 in the Indian Ocean, around the French department of Réunion Island. Tailing a group of marine life researchers studying the sounds of the humpback led me to a mother and calf duo. The pair was resting in shallow waters, morphologically marked by their long pectoral fins and knobbly heads. A slow, unobtrusive approach allowed for this intimate sighting.



PYGMY SEAHORSE

Hermit crabs, sea slugs, or nudibranchs as flashy as your paisley-pant cousin—the Lembeh Strait is big on hues. I scanned the sea between Indonesia's Sulawesi and Lembeh islands for this colourful pygmy seahorse. *Hippocampus bargibanti*, nicknamed Bargibant's seahorse, is both vibrant and small. Measuring around two-thirds of my little finger, it is also difficult to find. The lure of the marine microelement, usually camouflaged against host gorgonian corals, pitted me against a strong current. But its fleshy, bulbous body—in this case lozenge-pink—made for a stunning frame 88 feet underwater. It was worth it. ✕



TRAVEL QUIZ

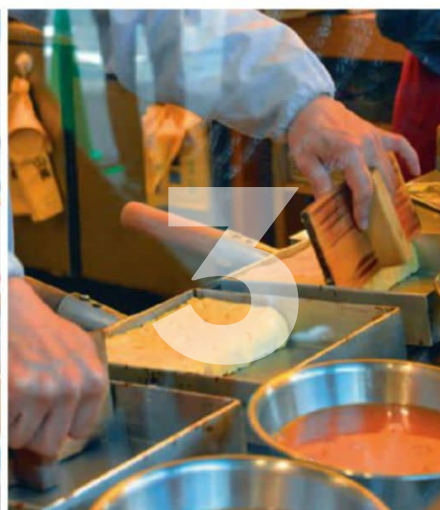
TEST YOUR TRAVEL IQ



WHICH ASIAN COUNTRY IS FAMED FOR *LECHON*, A SPIT-ROASTED SUCKLING PIG, OF SPANISH ORIGIN?



THIS MEXICAN SAUCE, COMMONLY LADLED OVER A PLATE OF ENCHILADAS, HAS A CHILLI-AND-CHOCOLATE BASE.



THIS TYPE OF JAPANESE OMELETTE IS MADE BY ROLLING LAYERS OF COOKED EGG TOGETHER IN A RECTANGULAR PAN KNOWN AS MAKIYAKINABE.



WHAT WOULD YOU CALL THE BLEND OF SPICES AND HERBS USED TO FLAVOUR AMERICAN BBQ?



ANTHONY BOURDAIN AND FORMER U.S. PRESIDENT OBAMA IMMORTALISED *BÚN CHẢ*, A GRILLED PORK AND NOODLE DISH IN THIS VIETNAMESE RESTAURANT.



ENGLAND'S VERSION OF BLOOD SAUSAGE IS KNOWN AS BLACK PUDDING. WHAT WOULD IT BE REFERRED TO AS IN FRANCE?

ANSWERS 1. PHILIPPINES 2. MOLE 3. TAMAGOYAKI 4. A RUB 5. BÚN CHẢ HUÔNG LIÊN, HANOI 6. BOUDIN NOIR

RITA MERAKI/SHUTTERSTOCK (1), ESEDELVA/SHUTTERSTOCK (2), NIRADJ/SHUTTERSTOCK (3), JOSHUA RESNICK/SHUTTERSTOCK (4), BBIRDZ/SHUTTERSTOCK (5), TBY SHAIITH/SHUTTERSTOCK (6)